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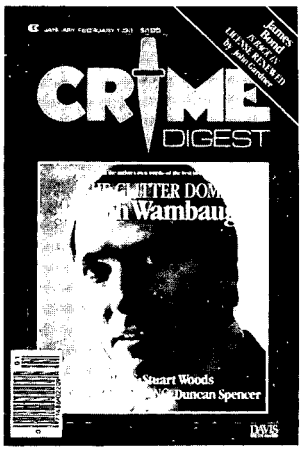

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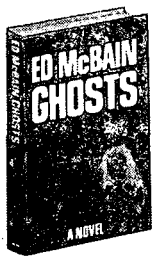

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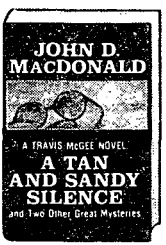

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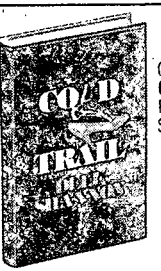

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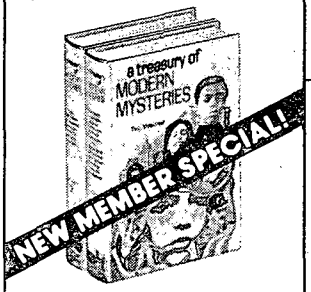

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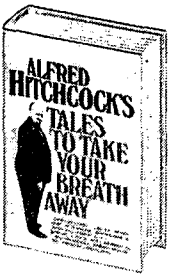

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a *NEW* Pierre Chambrun story by

HUGH PENTECOST

In which Mrs. Victoria Haven, eighty-one and seemingly as spry as if she were thirty-one, faces Death in one of the three penthouses of the Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel . . . a "moose head" of a story, but it won't deter you—not by one syllable . . .

CHAMBRUN GETS THE MESSAGE

by HUGH PENTECOST

There is an old story about two wealthy gentlemen having dinner together in one of their homes. After dinner they retire to the library where the butler serves brandy and coffee and passes the cigars. The host stands with his back to the fireplace where, over the mantel, is a stuffed moose head. "Did I ever tell you about my moose hunt?" the host asks. "No, but don't," says his friend. "Because I know how it came out."

This story would be a kind of a "moose head" to anyone who is a regular patron of the Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel. If you were to go into the Trapeze Bar for a cocktail any evening after work, you would see Victoria Haven at her usual corner table, accompanied by her Japanese friend, and holding court as usual. There is no way to create suspense over whether or not she survived the attempt to murder her because there she is, "alive and well and living in Paris" as the song goes. This cannot be called a "whodunit" because it wasn't "dun," but the story of how Victoria Haven kept herself from being murdered in cold blood is, I think, worth the telling.

In a time when everyone calls everyone else by his or her first

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name, Victoria Haven calls me Haskell, never once using my first name, Mark. It reminds me of when I was a kid in prep school and I was Haskell, M. when they called the roll in study hall. I have a crush on the lady, which may produce a snicker here and there. Mrs. Victoria Haven admits, without a blush, to having been born in 1900. I am thirty-five, the Public Relations Director of the Hotel Beaumont. Mrs. Haven lives in a penthouse on the roof and I see her almost every day of my life and look forward to it. She is something!

The Beaumont is famous for a number of things, primarily for its legendary manager, Pierre Chambrun. He is the king, the mayor, the boss of a small city within a city. He presides over his own police force, a shopping center, restaurants and bars, a bank, a health club, hospital facilities, and the living quarters for a thousand guests. Some of us who work for Chambrun think he has a magical radar system located behind his bright black eyes. He seems able to sense a malfunction in the Swiss-watch operations of the world he rules even before it happens.

Unfortunately Chambrun can't change human nature. He can't eliminate greed, or jealousy, or a passion for revenge, or the impulse toward treachery and betrayal in the individual man or woman. And so, as in every other place on earth, these ugly psychoses erupt in Chambrun's world too, and hamper man's efforts to lead peaceful and orderly lives.

It was one of these dark and twisted impulses that threatened the life of Victoria Haven in the spring of this year.

Not long ago a film company was considering one of the stories I've written about Chambrun. They asked me if I could suggest any actor who might play the role of the Great Man. Unfortunately the perfect choice is no longer available, the late Claude Rains. Chambrun is short, stocky, but elegant in his movements. His dark eyes are buried in deep pouches, and they can twinkle with humor, grow warm with compassion, or turn as cold as a hanging judge's. His clothes are custom tailored, his shirts, ties, and shoes made to order. He is something of a Beau Brummell, but he handles it naturally, without affectation.

He, too, has a very special place in his heart for Victoria Haven. It is whispered backstage that long ago there was a young man-older woman relationship between the two of them. She obviously has some kind of special drag with Chambrun because she is allowed to break so many house rules.

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Chambrun became the managing genius of the Beaumont in the early '50s, and, at the same time, Victoria Haven bought one of the three penthouses on the roof, a cooperative arrangement at that time. She was obviously a woman of means, because even in those days it was an expensive piece of real estate. There are two other penthouses flanking the lady's residence. Chambrun lives in one of them and the other is held in reserve for visiting foreign diplomats, in New York on United Nations business.

Only one elevator goes to that top level, and the man who operates it won't take you there without word from the front desk that Chambrun, or Mrs. Haven, or the guest in Penthouse Number 3 has approved, in effect has given the green light. You are as safe up there from unwanted intrusion as if you were detached from the rest of the world. Or so it seemed.

I have mentioned Mrs. Haven's Japanese friend who sits with her in the Trapeze Bar at the cocktail hour. He is one of the house rules that Mrs. Haven is allowed to break. He is a small snubnosed Japanese Spaniel, snarling, unfriendly, contemptuous. He sits on his own chair, on his own red satin cushion, and indicates clearly that he is bored with the sophisticated social world of the Beaumont. His name is Toto.

Actually, in my time at the hotel, there have been two Totos, and I understand that there was still another before that. Pets are not allowed in the hotel, but Toto is the exception. Mrs. Haven and "my Japanese gentleman friend" are, you might say, landmarks. If for some reason they miss the cocktail hour in the Trapeze, or are late appearing, Mr. Del Greco, the maitre d', is swamped with anxious inquiries from the regulars who fear something may have happened to the lady and her companion.

She is not inconspicuous.

At eighty-one Victoria Haven is tall, ramrod-straight. She walks briskly, like a woman of thirty. Her hair, quantities of it, is piled on top of her head, a henna-red that God never dreamed of. She wears plain, black silk dresses, sedate and proper, but she has on enough dazzling rings, bracelets, pendants, and earrings to send the manager of Tiffany's racing back to his store to check on the inventory.

"I have been a kept woman all my life, Haskell," she told me one day, "but not one of these baubles came to me for any other reason than love—good, sensuous, passionate love."

She had started out toward the end of World War One as a dancer

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in a cabaret, Chambrun told me. "She had legs that put the Betty Grables of her time to shame."

At eighty-one she is an outrageous and altogether charming flirt. I've never seen her with a woman friend, but men of all ages flock to her table in the Trapeze, ignoring Toto's growling hostility. She is still all woman, and fifty years ago she must have been the living end.

She was dangerously close to another kind of end that spring day. Afterward she told me she had wondered. "I felt a little like William Saroyan," she said, "who said to the press just before the end that he'd been told that all of us have to face death, but he'd supposed an exception would be made in his case. I've always thought that, Haskell, but yesterday I wasn't so sure. Not sure at all."

The complex problems of maintenance in an establishment like the Beaumont are beyond imagination. I'm not talking about maid service, cleaning crews, waiters and maitre d's, chefs, kitchen staffs, bellboys, telephone switchboard operators—services supplied by people. I was thinking of the maintenance of machinery. I'm talking about a forty-story building that has to be heated in winter, air-conditioned in summer, about two banks of elevators that have to be kept in service around the clock, about ice machines, refrigerator rooms, hundreds of different electrical gadgets that supply special luxuries to the guests—portable broiler-ovens, toasters, drink mixers, and on and on. There are three chief engineers, each working an eight-hour shift plus a crew of men who know exactly how everything works and where everything is located.

That staff of experts was prepared to deal with any sort of emergency that might develop in the hotel's equipment, and to maintain regular maintenance checks. Occasionally, however, outside specialists become involved. Twice a year the two banks of elevators are checked out by experts from the manufacturer. If any parts or cables or controls need replacing, these outsiders deal with the problem. It is a part of some kind of warranty.

Their presence is never particularly noticed, because they put only one car at a time out of commission. In the case of the roof and its three penthouses, however, this makes for a brief dislocation for the top-level residents—Chambrun, Mrs. Haven, and whoever may be in Penthouse Number 3. Only one elevator goes to the roof and when that is being checked out, it means the boss, Mrs. Haven, and the guest in Number 3 will have to use the fire stairs from the fortieth

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floor to the thirty-ninth, to come and go for perhaps two or three hours.

Chambrun, of course, knows when it is going to happen and arranges accordingly. Mrs. Haven and the guest in Number 3 are notified a couple of days in advance, reminded, and re-reminded. The period of non-service is always from ten in the morning till about two in the afternoon.

One of the extraordinary things about Chambrun is his knowledge of the personal lives of all the hundreds of people who work for him, from Betsy Ruysdale, his fabulous secretary, down to the lowliest dishwasher in the main kitchen. He knows family histories, how many children there are, the schools they go to, medical problems, and so on. People will give an arm for him because he is aware of their problems before he is told. He does not have this kind of special knowledge, however, of the people who come in from the outside, like the elevator experts. That lack of knowledge came close to costing Victoria Haven her life.

The hotel's security force in command of Jerry Dodd, a wiry, bright-eyed, very tough former F.B.I. agent, is a marvel of efficiency. You go into the hotel and wander down some corridor where you are not supposed to go, or open the door of some anteroom, and someone is almost instantly at your elbow, asking you what cooks. But when special service people come in no one checks on them. They have free run of the place to do their jobs, whatever they may be. So what happened to Victoria Haven could not be blamed on Chambrun or Jerry Dodd. Neither one of them is psychic, although I sometimes wonder about Chambrun.

One more note before the curtain rises on a beautiful spring day with Death threatening to play the leading role. When I first came to know Mrs. Haven she had a routine that has since been abandoned. Three times a day and once in the latish evening she charged through the lobby with Toto under her arm. The little spaniel had to "do his duty." On a summer day, when a topcoat wasn't necessary, she was quite a sight, her jewelry glittering and flashing. I remember remarking to Chambrun that she was asking for trouble with all the junkies and muggers populating the streets. Every day we heard of someone snatching a gold chain or some other piece of jewelry off a lady's neck, or wrist, or hand. Victoria Haven was too inviting a target, I thought.

Chambrun gave me a wry smile and said nothing. But I learned, doing my own snooping, that every time she went out one of Jerry

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Dodd's men strolled after her. If anyone had even so much as taken a step toward the lady he would have been instantly confronted by an armed and tough security man. No one, I learned, had ever told the lady she was being protected, but I think she was too clever, too observant, not to have noticed it. I tell this only to show how closely Chambrun watched over her. When the city passed a law that pet owners had to follow their dogs equipped with scoopers, Mrs. Haven abandoned her outdoor forays.

"I would not be caught dead following Toto around with a shovel," she announced to the world at large.

A special place in her roof garden was set aside for Toto's problem, which explains why, on the day the elevator to the roof was out of service, Mrs. Haven had no reason to leave her penthouse.

On that day, a few minutes after noon, Victoria Haven came face to face with Death. He didn't look like Death or anyone dangerous. He was a small, dark young man sitting just outside her garden hedge, eating his lunch from a brown paper bag. Mrs. Haven was made aware of his presence by Toto, who, spotting a stranger, made bloodcurdling noises of protest through his upturned nose. Looking over her garden hedge, Mrs. Haven saw the man, and that he was wearing grease-stained coveralls.

"Toto!" she called. "My dog isn't partial to strangers. You are working on the elevator?"

The man—almost a boy, she thought—gave her a bright smile. "Lunch break," he said.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Carl," he said.

"I'm not partial to first names," Mrs. Haven told him. "What is your last name?"

"Stratton," he said. "I am Carl Stratton. And you, ma'am?"

"I am Mrs. Victoria Haven," she said.

His smile became even brighter. "Victoria is a nice name—Victoria."

There was a kind of impertinent flirtatiousness about him that pleased the lady. "It's pretty hot out here in the sun," she said.

"After working in the dark shaft all morning it is pleasant," Stratton said. "But if I'm in the way—"

"Would you like some iced tea to go with your sandwich?" she asked. "I have some already made in the refrigerator."

"That would be most pleasant," he said. He was not looking her in the eyes any longer. His attention seemed to be directed toward her conspicuous display of rings, bracelets, and pendants.

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"Come on inside and I'll pour you some," Mrs. Haven said.

Toto expressed his outrage with a snarl and disappeared into the garden. Mrs. Haven preceded the expectant Stratton through the front door into her penthouse.

I imagine Stratton was as astonished by what confronted him inside this obviously rich lady's living quarters as I was the first time I saw it. You expected elegance and grandeur but that isn't what you saw. The first impression one had was of total disorder, a crowded storage space for junk. There was twice as much old Victorian furniture as the place could comfortably contain. Heavy red velvet drapes shut out the world, day and night. Bookcases overflowed into stacks of books on the floor and stacks of newspapers from God-knows-how-far-back.

When you first recover from this apartment's incredible collection of rubble, you make a discovery. There isn't a speck of dust anywhere. The entire apartment is spotless. What appears to be total disorder is obviously perfect order to Mrs. Haven. "Ask for an article from the op-ed page of *The New York Times* from ten years back," Chambrun once told me, "and she will reach out, probably not moving from her chair, and produce it for you. She knows exactly where anything she cherishes is located."

Mrs. Haven left Stratton in this antique-dealer's paradise and went to the kitchen to get him the promised iced tea. He looked around him, intently curious, not daring to move anything from a chair in order to sit down. Mrs. Haven reappeared with iced tea in a frosted glass.

"Just throw that stuff off that chair, there, Stratton, and sit," the lady said.

He picked up some papers from a Windsor chair as if he might find a Black Widow spider hiding beneath them. He accepted the tea, his eyes focused on the diamond-studded pin that decorated the front of her dress.

"You have jewels for a queen," he said.

She smiled at him. "I had more fun acquiring them than most queens do," she said.

"The way things are today you must have a good safe to keep them in," Stratton remarked.

"Jewels are no fun if you keep them locked away," she said. "Will the elevator be running when they promised—at two o'clock?"

"Before that if all goes well," he said.

"Splendid. I have an appointment at five—as usual."

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"You're not afraid of thieves?" he asked.

"I am as well guarded in this hotel as if it were Fort Knox," she said.

Casual talk and the time came for Carl Stratton to get back on the job. He thanked the lady politely, carried his empty glass back into the kitchen, thanked the lady again, and departed.

A nothing moment, if you had asked Mrs. Haven just then. She had done a kindness for a maintenance man who was, indirectly, making certain a service she counted on was in working order. She would have given a cold drink to almost anyone on a hot day. An unmemorable moment in an unmemorable day—so far.

At five o'clock that afternoon Mrs. Haven and Toto went down for their customary cocktail hour in the Trapeze Bar. It was an early evening when many friends stopped by her table to chat. A British diplomat whom she'd met years ago in Cairo was delighted to encounter her again and invited her to dine with him.

"Lord Ormsby," she told us later. "Willie Belton when I met him just after World War One. Damned near as old as I am. Horrible shape, though. Walks with a stick."

They dined in the Blue Lagoon, our night club. Toto is not allowed in the main dining room. The two old people apparently had a lovely time reliving half a century or more. It was nearly eleven when Mrs. Haven and Toto returned to her penthouse.

"Willie offered to escort me up to the roof," Mrs. Haven told us later, "but I told him chivalry didn't have to go that far. Good thing he accepted the idea. The dear old boy might have got himself killed!"

So it was that she returned to the roof alone, except, of course, for Toto. The little dog was left in the garden. He had a special "dog door" in and out of the kitchen which he could manage by himself. Mrs. Haven let herself in at the front door, switched on the lights, and found herself facing Carl Stratton standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"How did you get in here?" Mrs. Haven asked sharply.

"Fixed the lock on the kitchen door when I was here earlier," Stratton said. "Where do you keep them?"

"Keep what?"

"Your jewels, Victoria. Where do you keep them? I've turned the place upside down—no safe, no strongbox. Where are they?"

Maybe she made some kind of instinctive gesture, because he stepped forward and snatched away her suitcase-like handbag, and backed away, opening it.

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"My God!" he said.

"Safest place to keep them is with me," Mrs. Haven said.

"My God!" Stratton said again. "In here—and on you—there must be a million bucks' worth!"

"I should have estimated it a little higher than that," Mrs. Haven said. She dropped down in the big armchair which Chambrun called her throne. "So you've got them, Stratton. Would you mind very much leaving me the privacy to go to bed?"

He moistened his lips. "How old are you, Victoria?" he asked.

"Eighty-one—if it matters," she said.

"It matters," Stratton said, his eyes very bright. "Eighty-one years is quite a lot of living. It makes what I have to do a little less difficult."

"What you have to do?"

"Well, I can't go off with your million dollars and leave you to tell the police who was responsible." He shifted her bag under one arm, and from inside his coat he produced a switchblade knife. "I'm going to have to silence you rather permanently, Victoria. I'll try to make it as painless as possible."

He took a step toward her and out of the kitchen came Toto, snarling fiercely.

"I'll cut your stinking little head off, buster, if you don't stay away from me!" Stratton shouted.

"Toto!" The old woman's voice was clear and controlled. "Go somewhere and tend to your own business!"

The little dog gave Stratton a parting snarl, and headed back for the kitchen. Mrs. Haven leaned back in her chair.

"I suppose you have no choice, Stratton," she said. "Perhaps you would let me have one cigarette before you cut my throat."

Without waiting for Stratton to answer, she began fumbling in the stack of newspapers next to her chair. When she turned to face him again she was holding a giant handgun, a small cannon, aimed straight at his heart.

"Now, my young idiot," she said, "you will bring me that telephone and we'll put an end to this. It has a nice long cord on it."

He stared at her, like a bird fascinated by a cobra. "The phone won't work, Victoria. I cut the wires when I first let myself in."

"Then we'll just have to wait, won't we?" Mrs. Haven said.

"Wait for what?"

"Why, for someone to come."

"When will that be?"

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"Who knows? I rather doubt there will be anyone before the maid who comes about nine in the morning."

The heavy gun was steady as a rock in Mrs. Haven's hand, her elbow resting on the arm of her chair. Stratton must have been thinking the old woman couldn't keep it steady for too long. He moistened his lips, and there were little beads of sweat on his forehead. The light glittered on the blade of his knife.

"Do you really know how to use that thing, Victoria?" he asked.

"Oh, my, do I know how!" Mrs. Haven said, smiling at him. "One of the first men in my life was a very rich oil man from Texas. He saw me at a nightclub where I was dancing."

"You were a dancer?" The young man was playing for time, trying to judge the distance between himself and the "throne."

"A very good one," Mrs. Haven said. "But my Texas friend was traveling around the world in those days. He wanted me with him and I wanted to be with him. He was afraid someone might try to get at him through me, so he taught me how to handle a gun. Would you believe I can still hit a fifty-cent piece at fifty paces?"

"Not really," Stratton said.

"You had better believe." Mrs. Haven smiled grimly. "My Texas friend gave me this diamond clasp I'm wearing." She touched the pin on the front of her dress with her free hand. "That was over fifty years ago. I suggest you sit down, young man. It will be a long time until the maid comes."

He sat down, facing her, wondering how long it would be before the gun hand wavered. It couldn't be too long now.

"My friend from Texas taught me to shoot with both hands," Mrs. Haven said, almost casually. "I am as good left-handed as I am right-handed." With which she shifted the gun from one hand to the other. That way, Stratton realized, she could hold out for a long, long time.

Could she really handle the gun, he wondered? If he made a quick lunge at her would she react in time? Something in her cold blue eyes warned him to wait. In time fatigue would overtake this aged crone.

"If you'd care for a little music while we wait." Mrs. Haven said, "you can turn on the hi-fi set over there in the corner."

"You're as crazy as a bedbug, Victoria," Stratton said. "I can last longer than you can last."

"I know what you're hoping for, Stratton," she said. "Don't count on it."

An hour went by, with two people staring at each other, with

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Death waiting for one of them in the wings. Then Toto reappeared, snarling and whimpering.

"Toto! I told you to go somewhere and tend to your own business!" Mrs. Haven said, a sharp edge to her voice.

The little dog gave her a sullen look and padded back into the kitchen.

A little after midnight I went up to Chambrun's penthouse with him. There was some kind of convention being held in the Beaumont the next day and Chambrun had a list of names he wanted me to have which he hadn't brought down to his second-floor office. We sat there, having a drink and going over the next day's details, when I heard an unusual sound.

"You got rats in the woodwork?" I asked Chambrun.

"I think not," he said. He walked over to the garden door and opened it. There, looking up at us sullenly, was Toto, Mrs. Haven's Japanese friend.

"I didn't know you and Toto were friends," I said.

"We're not," Chambrun said. "He hates my guts." Even as he spoke he was picking up the phone. "Get me Jerry Dodd," he said. A moment later he had our head security man on the line. "There's something wrong in Mrs. Haven's penthouse," Chambrun told him. "Get the passkeys and get up here on the double."

I couldn't believe it. "She's sick, you think? Let's get over there, boss."

"We'll wait for Jerry," he said.

It seemed like forever—I suppose it was less than ten minutes—before Jerry Dodd arrived. We could tell there were lights on in Mrs. Haven's penthouse, but we couldn't see in.

"Damned drapes are always drawn," Chambrun said. "Give me the front-door passkey, Jerry. You take the back." He glanced at his watch. "Twelve seventeen. We'll all go in at precisely twenty past."

And we did.

Mrs. Haven sat there, holding her gun on Stratton. When he saw Chambrun he decided to make a run for it. As he passed the kitchen door, Jerry Dodd knocked him cold with the butt of his gun.

Mrs. Haven's pale blue eyelids lowered for a moment as she put her cannon down on the stack of newspapers beside her chair. Then she gave us a report on what had happened.

"Would you have shot him, Victoria?" Chambrun asked.

"I haven't fired a gun for more than fifty-five years," Mrs. Haven

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said. "And anyway, I took the bullets out of this thing years ago. I was afraid someone would stumble on it and hurt themselves."

"An empty gun!" I heard Jerry Dodd mutter. He was handcuffing the unconscious Stratton behind his back.

"I always said, Dodd, that I could have been a very good actress," Mrs. Haven said. "That misguided young man seems to have bought my performance. I had to be good, you know. He was going to kill me."

Toto was sniffling on the floor beside her chair.

"Extraordinary that he had the instinct to go for help," I said.

Chambrun gave Mrs. Haven a wry smile. "We'd better show Mark how it works, Victoria," he said, "or we'll have a whole new folklore about animals."

Mrs. Haven stood up and looked down at the little dog.

"Go somewhere, Toto, and tend to your own business," she said.

Toto gave her a bored look and went out to the kitchen. I could hear his little dog door open and close. Mrs. Haven went to one of the windows and opened the drape. She beckoned to me and I could see Toto trotting across the roof to Chambrun's penthouse. We watched him reach the garden door and scratch on it.

"I have trained him to follow that command—'go tend to your own business,' " Mrs. Haven said. "Pierre has always been concerned about my having so much of value here. If Toto ever scratched on his door he'd know I had more trouble than a stomachache. Tonight I had to send him twice before you came upstairs, Pierre."

So that was how Chambrun got the message.

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a *NEW* short story by

SIMON BRETT

Henry and Vera Baker were married in 1947, long before the explosion of Women's Liberation. Their marriage was typical of millions of marriages round the world. Now, why should such a marriage hit a reef, pile up on the rocks, go aground? Is it because wives, even the most ordinary and conventional, have needs whose existence their husbands do not even suspect? And husbands, even the most chauvinistic and old-fashioned—do they have needs their wives are not remotely aware of? And how far can a storm-tossed marriage go before shipwreck?

ESCAPE ROUTES

by SIMON BRETT

Faith is often the willing acceptance of what is demonstrably untrue, and the basis of marriage is faith. Once that faith breaks down, the marriage may break down too, and end in spite, despair, hatred, or, as in the case of Henry and Vera Baker, in worse.

Marriage, like other disputes, is a continual process of demarcation. Two people living together have to define their own boundaries, territorial, moral, and emotional, and this takes a long time. What is more, the boundaries keep changing. However organized the couple are in dividing their lives during the early days of marriage, changing circumstances—the arrival of children, financial successes and failures, or just the inevitable advances of age—call for constant redefinition.

When Henry and Vera Baker married, in 1947, the boundaries had been comparatively easy to draw. He was thirty, and she ten years younger. He had seen active service during the War, while

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she had been at school for most of its duration, away from the dangers of bombs, with nothing but half-heard radio bulletins, unread newspapers, and the ever-present fact of rationing to remind her that the War was on.

Age, then, and greater experience of the world, meant that Henry was the dominant partner. Society approved of this, for, though the War had brought many new freedoms to women, the institution of marriage was a conservative bastion and slow to change its traditional image. As all the clichés demanded, the man wore the trousers, his home was his castle, and he was the breadwinner.

All these were true in the Bakers' household. Henry commuted every day to the City, where he earned the family's bread. He worked in an insurance company for a salary undisclosed to his wife. At the beginning of every month he handed over her housekeeping budget, in cash—she did not have a bank account. In the first year of their marriage she more than once found she had run out of money by the end of the month—particularly if it had the full complement of thirty-one days—and had to ask her husband for a supplement. On these occasions he scolded her, with the result that she learned to manage better. Within a couple of years she was even contriving to save a little each month.

When she did the shopping, she paid in cash. She had no credit accounts, and bills that came through the post were opened by, and paid by, her husband.

In the early years they did not have alcohol in the house and went out rarely. Vera had never been to a pub in her life. She would have demurred at the idea if Henry had suggested taking her into one (which he never did); and the thought of her going alone was as alien—and indeed on about the same level—as the thought of her soliciting on a street corner.

Once a year, just before Christmas, Henry took Vera to the firm's annual dinner-and-dance, a function of excruciating politeness, during which the wives sat stiffly in dresses that showed their shoulders, until spoken to by the firm's boss, to whom, for months afterward, they were convinced they had said the wrong thing. Vera spent a long time thinking about what to wear for this occasion, which was completely wasted effort, because for the first five years of their marriage she wore the same dress each year, with different "accessories." ("Accessories" were then an essential part of the female wardrobe.)

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Each year Henry wore his father's dinner suit, which very nearly fitted him.

At the firm's dinner-and-dance—and indeed on other social occasions, when there were any—Henry led the conversation. He did not expect Vera to initiate a subject when in company. He would probably have been very offended if she had done so, but Vera knew her place, and his good humor was not tested in that way.

The same distribution of responsibility carried over into the Bakers' sex life. Their matings, whose frequency did not differ much from the national average, occurred always on Henry's instigation. They were predictable and short, but Vera, knowing her duties, never opposed his demands or considered the possibility of variation. Contraception was Henry's responsibility; like his salary check and the household bills, it was unseen.

Their home was as rigidly demarcated as if it had been fenced into units. The only area over which Vera had uncontested hegemony was the kitchen, though when the children arrived, she was allowed the same control of the nursery. In the rest of the house she had cleaning, sweeping, and dusting rights; decoration and structural repairs were Henry's province.

Substantial jobs in the garden were also his—digging, mowing the lawn, clearing leaves. Vera was delegated to weeding and the tending of flowers, which were held to be appropriately feminine pastimes.

The same went for the tending of children. And having them. Interest in such distasteful processes was not thought proper to a man and so, while Vera screamed and sweated her way through three labors under the unforgiving eyes of spinster midwives, Henry went to work as normal and spent his evenings in the pub, an atypical indulgence which the exceptional circumstances justified.

When the children had arrived, they very definitely remained Vera's responsibility. Their feeding, their cleaning, even their illnesses, were not subjects Henry wished to know about. If they screamed during the night and woke him, he would turn over with a bad-tempered remark about her lack of control, and leave Vera to get up and quiet them. If she failed to do this promptly, he would be even more annoyed.

He could no more have changed a nappy than she could have paid a bill.

This then was their life in the early years of marriage. Both knew the boundaries; both respected them. Neither would have contem-

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plated the idea of having an affair, even if the opportunity had arisen. Which it didn't.

And, if asked, both would have said they were happy. They were married, and the life they lived was what marriage was. Anything outside their boundaries was probably dangerous, and certainly irresponsible.

They both knew human life was an imperfect system, and both thought they were getting as much out of it as most other people.

And when life's deficiencies became too apparent, they both had escape routes to take their minds off the inadequacy of their existence.

Their palliatives were predictable, each supplying to the imagination what, for each, the real relationship lacked.

For Vera it was romantic fiction, which she read voraciously through all sorts of domestic crises. The books calmed her, taking her back to the days of her extremely innocent early adolescence, when a legitimate girlish pastime was "waiting for Mr. Right," living in expectation of the arrival of a *deus ex machina*, upright, honest, and strikingly handsome, who would finally come into her life and change it, without effort, to a continuing dream of unbroken fulfillment.

Marriage to Henry had not altered Vera's interior fantasies. His less-than-godlike appearance, his less-than-godlike generosity in flower-giving and other romantic gestures, the messy little reality of sex—none of these had impinged on Vera's dream world. She was still waiting for Mr. Right.

The fact that she had achieved the peak of her adolescent aspirations, and found a real man to marry her, was irrelevant. The Mr. Rights who lived in her mind, undergoing constant minor alterations according to what she was reading at the time, had nothing to do with Henry. She was not even disappointed that Henry was not like them. She had never expected him to be; indeed, if he had borne any similarity to them at all, she probably would have been disappointed, deprived of a certain richness in her fantasy life. She wished to keep her dreams intact.

These dreams were not erotic. Possibly Vera was not very highly sexed. Her upbringing would definitely have discouraged any such tendency, and Henry's perfunctory attitude to sex was not calculated to stir latent passions.

No, the Mr. Rights in her mind did not attack her. They were very

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decorous, and rarely seen without the full uniform of evening dress. They were surrounded by roses. They wore them in their button holes, sent her huge bunches of them, and presented her with individual blooms at every meeting. They were usually seen across dinner tables, or on balconies against summer evening skies. They were tall and strong, their only weakness manifested in a certain mistiness in the eyes when they looked at her. They understood her, all of her.

And they did their job well. They kept her calm, they kept her off smoking, drinking, and tranquillizers. They satisfied needs in her, whose existence her husband did not even suspect.

Henry also had unsatisfied needs, but his were different. His mind, like hers, was peopled by figures who had taken up residence in early adolescence and continued their occupation, with only cosmetic changes, through his messy wartime sexual encounters and the regularities of marriage. His squatters were female and as physical as Vera's were spiritual. In place of evening dress they usually wore nothing. Any garments they did have were distinctly impermanent—blouses to be opened in a spatter of buttons, brassieres with capitulating clasps, skirts that flew up at will, and suspenders that unpopped at a finger's pressure.

They were born, not of books, but of pictures. Postcards, on the whole. Grubby black and white scenes of ineptly posed women, faces leering with blank allure. Their plots were no less predictable than those of Vera's books, and the relief they supplied was just as effective, and just as harmless.

Henry kept his growing collection of pictures in the room designated as his "study," in a locked filing cabinet. Its drawer was labeled "Accounts," a sufficient deterrent to Vera's curiosity, which was never strong.

In the evenings, after supper, he would frequently go upstairs to "go through his accounts." On these occasions he would lock the study door, a needless precaution, because, if Vera did want to make contact, she would just shout to him up the stairs.

What he did with the contents of his "Accounts" drawer was his own affair. It caused no noticeable harm to his character or their marriage, and indeed may have helped to alleviate the pressures caused by their collision.

So both Henry and Vera had areas in their minds of privacy which could not be invaded, and from which they drew strength. . .

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Henry had one other private area which could have been invaded by Vera at will, but one of the earliest ground rules of their marriage forbade such intrusion, and Vera felt little urge to break the terms of their treaty.

His other secret was his diary. Every evening when he went to bed he would fill in the allotted space, and replace the book by the bedside, where it would remain all day. While he was at the office, Vera would clean around it, occasionally picking it up to dust its cover; never would she contemplate opening it. The notion did not occur to her that the diary might contain anything to surprise or alarm; she thought her husband's life as predictable as her own.

This lack of curiosity was completely justified. The nightly entries were no more than a catalogue of trains caught and clients met. Whole weeks would pass with each day's record indistinguishable from another. Every word was humdrum fact; there was no chronicle of emotions, no expression of aspirations, no comment on international or domestic events. Why he kept the diary at all was a mystery, probably even to himself. It was a habit he had got into while in the Armed Forces, maybe in an attempt to differentiate, or at least to count, the soldier's identical days.

And when Henry Baker developed a habit it stayed with him. So the diary stayed by the marriage bed, unread by Vera.

It was, perhaps, a symbol of trust in a marriage otherwise devoid of symbols.

And so their lives continued. There were material changes. The children grew up. There was a bit more money around, and slowly Henry overcame his instinctive parsimony to the extent of keeping a bottle of sherry in the cupboard and taking the family on an annual holiday to the seaside. They moved twice, each time to a slightly larger house.

And in each move the filing cabinet moved to a new "study," its drawers firmly locked. As time went by, the "Accounts" section spread, first to two, then to three, and finally to all four drawers, reflecting the enrichment of Henry's fantasy life.

But this expansion of source material made only small changes to the voracious women who peopled his imagination. True, they came out of the shadows of monochrome into full color, and their posing shook off all trace of inhibition; but the images in Henry's mind while he "went through his accounts" remained those of his adolescence, with the slightest of variations.

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Vera's Mr. Right didn't alter much either. Their dinner jackets changed in cut, they even occasionally appeared on beaches in neatly pressed leisurewear, their faces were molded by the plastic surgery of imagination into the outlines of television stars; but their impeccable manners and—more important—their respect for, and understanding of, Vera remained exactly as when they had first visited her in her teens.

So, while marriage kept their bodies claustrophobically together, Henry and Vera Baker's minds drifted further and further apart.

But, even so, there need never have been a crisis, a moment when the clash of their fantasies detonated an explosion. Plenty of marriages survive till death with the partners' private fantasies intact, with secret hatreds and disappointments dying, unvoiced, with their owners.

And it could have happened with the Bakers.

But it didn't.

Partly, it was external pressures. The world they found themselves in in the late seventies was very different from the one they had married into in 1947. Sex was no longer a subject for secret mutterings, timid talks, and ambiguous allusions; it now screamed out from every billboard, every cinema, even the hitherto decorous television screen.

Their children, in spite of an upbringing which had combined conventional morality with shamefaced obscurantism on the subject, had a completely different attitude to sex. For them it was another consumer product, something like the alcohol, records, and clothes they so lavishly bought, something to be enjoyed. Any other view of it provoked derisive laughter and talk of "hang-ups."

The fact that their children were so patently—indeed blatantly—promiscuous made it hard for Henry and Vera not to feel their own attitudes were being challenged.

It was not a good time of life for either of them, anyway. Henry was nearly sixty, but the lusts of the body showed no signs of diminishing. On the contrary, they seemed stronger and less amenable to control. The provocation of a cinema poster or the unbrassiered relaxation of one of his sons' girl friends could stir him in seconds to lusts which were but ill satisfied by "going through his accounts."

And now that naked girls lounged on every billboard, the efficacy of his drawerfuls of pictures seemed impaired. Part of their potency for him had always been their secrecy. They were objects not readily

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available. They were his. Private. But now everyone could get them. He found more explicit material than his own collection under his fifteen-year-old son's bed. Henry's imaginative life was diminished, sullied.

And inevitably, as age encroached on his horizon, and the new world blared its message of instant fulfillment, he began to have doubts, to fear that perhaps he had not led his life as effectively as he could. Perhaps all the time he had spent "going through his accounts" had been a poor substitute for reality. As everything he read now screamed at him, the world was full of real flesh-and-blood women, hungry for men's attention.

Had he deluded himself all these years?

Had he missed the boat?

Vera's confusions resolved themselves into the same question. She found the physical changes of her late forties difficult to cope with; the long knowledge of their inevitability did not make the reality any easier. The body which she had managed so long without thinking about it suddenly became capable of cruel surprises.

And the mind which she had always subdued also threatened to become uncontrollable. She realized the precarious nature of the mental balance she had achieved in her adult life. Her old resource, the conjuration of a smiling Mr. Right, was no longer adequate. Instead, her mind filled, unbidden, with images of different men, crude physical figures whose animal quality both appalled and intrigued her.

For the first time in her life Vera Baker felt lust.

It wasn't focused; it had nothing to do with her continuing occasional couplings with Henry; it was just a fierce restlessness, stirred embarrassingly by the sight of a youth on a bicycle or the flash of a torso in a television commercial.

And this new imperative cast doubts on all her previous life.

Had she repressed her true nature all those years?

Had she missed the boat?

And yet it need not have led to a climax. Plenty of couples suffer comparable pressures and regain individual equanimity and a mutual relationship. It was inevitably a time of stress—they could no longer ignore the fact that they were getting old. The children had left home and removed Vera's *raison d'être*; retirement loomed for Henry like a great void.

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But they would have coped, had a bad couple of years, and then come through safely.

If it hadn't been for Henry's diary.

It started as an accident, an accident that could have happened at any time during their marriage, but in fact came about after thirty years.

Vera was dusting the bedroom. She did this with the same ferocious doubt that now attended all her actions. Should she be doing it? In a world where strident women proclaimed their rights on television, wasn't she making herself a laughing-stock? Was she any better than a slave, a passive instrument of masculine will?

These self-lacerating thoughts, together with the pills her doctor (inevitably male) had patronizingly prescribed, made her clumsy, and, as her duster flicked savagely at the bedside table it dislodged Henry's diary, which fell onto the carpet.

Open.

The entry was for about a month before.

"May 10th. Up 7:30. Office 9:15. 10:00—meeting with Carson, Brown and Fuller. Lesley's farewell drinks in the Feathers at lunchtime. 3:00—Policy Planning Group Meeting. Home 6:30. Watched some television. To bed 10:30."

It was not, to put it mildly, exciting. If that represented the worst secret that the forbidden room of this particular Bluebeard's castle contained, then his wife had little to fear. No grounds for anxiety. Even the one unknown name, Lesley, even if it were female and not a surname, belonged to someone who had clearly left the firm. To harbor suspicions about her would be obviously inappropriate.

And yet the name stuck in Vera's mind.

Along with the fiercely physical men who had gatecrashed her demure fantasies had come women too. Not women to whom she felt attracted, but shadowy, silhouetted women, seen always in the distance with a man.

The man was Henry.

Again, the new public frankness was partly to blame. When every television play was about men having affairs, when women in newspapers and novels constantly denounced masculine deceit, it was natural for her to start wondering about Henry. He had always seemed so distant from her, so contained, so unromantic. Previously, she had just thought that was his nature, but increasingly she began

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to wonder if he was like that because all his affections were directed to another woman.

Vera knew nothing of Henry's life from the moment he left the house in the morning to the moment of his return at six thirty. She met his colleagues at the firm's annual dinner-and-dance, and on other rare social occasions, but they talked about nothing except work. Anyway, they were hardly likely to volunteer information about an office romance of Henry's. Men conspired together in their deceit of women; every modern novel told her that.

So it was quite possible that Henry was conducting an affair with someone in the office.

More than possible, it was likely.

Had probably been going on for years.

Round the office everyone knew; and she, Henry's wife, stuck at home, the only one in ignorance, was a long-standing office joke. Sly, disparaging remarks were made about her every time Henry went off with—

Went off with who?

Now that she had read the diary, she could supply the name.

Lesley.

She didn't check back through the entries for further references. The one insight had been sufficient. Henry, for years, had been having an affair with Lesley.

This knowledge polarized her feelings for her husband. What had previously been acceptance and apathy was now stripped down to bare hatred. She found herself staring with fascinated loathing at the breadth of his neck as he, unthanking, ate the meals she prepared. As he dressed, unaware of her, in the mornings, she gazed at the porcine grossness of his bristly body.

To think that he had deceived her for so many years, had accepted all her care and work, while his thoughts were with Lesley. While he was thinking of being in bed with Lesley. And, no doubt, when he was actually in her bed, Lesley and Henry would laugh at Vera's expense—poor stupid, unknowing Vera.

It was only a matter of time before she mentioned Lesley's name. Something so constantly in her mind had eventually to be voiced.

It happened when Henry came home an hour late one evening, at seven thirty rather than six thirty. This was almost unprece-

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dented in the long history of their marriage. He was hardly ever late without prior warning.

During that last hour's waiting the day's hatred grew to an intensity that frightened Vera. Now there could be no doubt. Now he was blatantly staying out with his mistress.

His signature tune of key in the lock and slamming door announced his arrival. Vera was almost surprised; in her mind he was never going to come back. He had moved in with Lesley, might return for some clothes, but basically had recognized the end of their marriage.

He stumped into the kitchen, where she stood, frozen, by the stove.

"Delayed for an hour outside Clapham Junction," he snorted. "Some bloody fool had thrown himself on the line."

Vera laughed harshly. "Oh, you weren't with Lesley?" she found herself saying.

Henry looked up blankly. "Lesley?"

"Yes, Lesley. You know—Lesley!"

He still looked uncomprehending.

"The Lesley," she spelled out, "who used to work in your office, and for whom you had a farewell drinking party on May tenth."

Henry's face clouded with anger.

"Have you been reading my diary?"

The revelation of Vera's betrayal of trust had a profound effect on Henry. A long-established ground rule of their marriage had been broken; now his wife might be capable of any perfidy. He felt absolved of all responsibility for her. He had looked after her for thirty years, and this was how she had thanked him.

But there was more to it than that. The moment had shaken him profoundly, and the strength of his perturbation was so great because she had mentioned Lesley. Not only mentioned her, but implied that Lesley was the sort of girl with whom he might have an affair.

Vera had in fact confirmed Henry's growing conviction, that he was the sort of man who should be having an affair with a young girl.

Because Lesley had affected him greatly during the short time she had worked in his office. It was guilt at his secret desires that had prevented him from mentioning the farewell party to Vera, afraid lest some embarrassing blush might betray his thoughts.

Lesley had been eighteen, reveling in the new knowledge of the effect her body had on older men. She had dressed in the abandoned

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way all young girls now affected, fully aware of the magnetic contours of her free-hanging bosom and tight buttocks. Henry had not been the only man in the office driven almost crazy by her proximity.

She had stayed briefly with the firm, quickly bored by insurance and anxious to flaunt her secretarial and other skills in the more glamorous worlds of advertising or television.

Henry had lusted after her fiercely whenever he saw her, though she did not replace the long-lease residents of his imagination. It was still the wild women of his adolescence with whom he "went through his accounts."

But Vera's betrayal changed that. Her belief that he could be having an affair reinforced his own. Henry's imaginings, like Vera's, now focused on the individual reality of Lesley.

It was a week before he did anything about it, a week of sliding concentration at the office and loaded silences at home.

Then, suddenly, he saw a way of reconciling the confusions in his mind, of mixing the now-inadequate charms of his old fantasies with the flesh-and-blood of Lesley.

It was through that symbol of his now-invaded privacy, his diary.

The idea came to him in a moment. When, after Vera's resentful supper, he had gone upstairs to "go through his accounts," he took the diary with him.

The filing cabinet drawers remained locked. He opened the diary, and started. He was surprised how easy it was, how natural. For the first time his diary became a record, not of facts, but of thoughts and feelings. Two private areas merged.

"8th July. Up 7:30. Office 9:15. 11:00—Actuarial Review. Canteen lunch. Met Lesley there. She said she was desperate for me, and suggested we go back to her flat. We got a cab, and with great difficulty managed to control ourselves until we got to the flat. We were hardly inside the door before . . ."

He wrote on in the same vein for an hour. All the fantasies he had shared with the shadow-women of his teens were shared on the page with Lesley. He wrote on and on, spilling over the allocated space for 8th July, on and on. It was in the middle of August when he stopped.

He felt better than he had for years. Through the diary he had reconciled the demands of fantasy and reality; he felt he was now an integrated personality.

And, also, he was taking a justified revenge on Vera. If she was

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going to read his diary, then he'd damned well give her something worth reading.

Surprisingly, it was a week before she opened the book again.

Every night for that week Henry retired upstairs after supper, and wrote with a demented concentration many a professional novelist would have envied. He reduced the size of his handwriting, fitting two lines where one was ruled, but by the 14th July he was midway through December and contemplating buying another diary.

It was, as it happened, on the 14th July that Vera opened the book.

Again, really, it was an accident, the diary again displaced by reckless dusting. This time it fell open at the middle of September, the pages curling with the intense pressure of the pen that had covered them.

And this time Vera read everything.

At six thirty she was waiting behind the front door for Henry's return. She carried a meat tenderizer.

It was when Henry turned to close the door that she hit him first. Then, as he fell, she just went on hitting him. When she stopped, exhausted, his head might have been a lump of meat.

Vera directed the police investigators to the diary, by way of explanation of her actions. That led them to interview Lesley at her latest job in an advertising agency.

She remembered Mr. Henry Baker's name from her employment with the insurance company, but she couldn't remember which one he was or what he looked like. To her they had all been just old men.

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Malcolm McClintick's first story, "Look of Evil," appeared in our December 1979 issue. His second story is a change of pace, always a welcome sign in the work of a new writer . . . The young woman in the red sweatshirt jogged every morning, and the man in the old gray sweatshirt bicycled . . .

WHO CAN YOU TRUST?

by MALCOLM McCLINTICK

Smith pedaled to the top of the hill, puffing a little, and started the long pleasant coast down the other side. Warm weather had come in mid-March, with a bright sun in a blue sky and hints of buds on the trees. Smith enjoyed these early spring mornings when most people had left for work and he could glide silently through the neighborhoods around his house, watching, taking in everything, thinking.

At the bottom of the hill a young woman in white shorts, running shoes, and a red sweatshirt was just coming out of her driveway. She jogged to the corner and turned left into a side street. Smith cycled after her. She had a good shape, perky brown hair, and trotted like someone who knew what she was doing. He was aware that he looked a little scruffy in his faded jeans with one patched knee, the old gray sweatshirt that still bore grease stains from a session beneath his VW, and tennis shoes that were so gray it was hard to tell they'd once been white. And his hair was falling down over his forehead. But he felt sure of himself.

As he drew even with the woman he slowed to match her pace, gave her what he hoped was a friendly grin, and said, "Good morning."

She turned to glance at him, flashing a big smile. He thought she

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was about twenty-five or so. Her nose was just a bit too large in an otherwise pretty face with big brown eyes.

"Good morning," she said, and kept jogging.

He took one hand away from the handlebars and pulled his wallet out of his hip pocket, flipped it open, and held it up to give her a brief view of the badge. "Detective Sergeant Smith, City Police," he said, pedaling evenly beside her. "I'm undercover. There've been some burglaries in this neighborhood, you know." He put the wallet back in his pocket.

The woman nodded. She wasn't breathing too hard. "Yes, I know. It's not safe anywhere these days, even in an area like this."

"Especially in an area like this. Burglars get a lot more valuable stuff from nice houses than they do from dumps."

"Are you watching for the burglars, then?" she asked.

"Yes. The ones around here are daytime burglars. I'm sure keeping my eyes open."

"Well, it's nice to know you're around." She gave him another big smile.

"You take care of yourself," he said, and pedaled harder, accelerating away from her. At the next corner he glanced back as he turned off to the right and saw her half a block back. He waved. She waved. It was a nice day. He chuckled to himself. Apparently that fake badge had fooled her. Well, it had fooled a lot of people.

Smith took his bicycle in the same direction the next morning and saw the woman again, at a quarter to nine, just in front of her house. It was the same kind of morning as before, with lots of sun and blue sky, and starlings and grackles running all over the yards. Even a robin or two showed up. Smith slowed his bike and coasted along next to the woman. She's away from her house at the same time each morning, he told himself.

She glanced up and smiled. "Hi there, Sergeant. More biking, huh?"

He grinned. "You ought to try it, instead of jogging. Not so hard on the back and feet."

"Well, I'm used to running. And I don't have a bike. Anyway, I sort of like it this way—just me and the outdoors."

"Married?"

There was a slight hesitation, he thought; then, "What?"

"Married. Are you married."

"Oh. Yes, I've got a husband. Usual hard-working type, leaves me

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all alone in the morning and comes home at six ready for his supper. I'm just a housewife."

"Just a housewife," he repeated. "That's nothing to be ashamed of. It's hard work, being a housewife."

She flashed him her smile again and eased up a little, forcing him to pedal still slower. "Have you got a wife, Sergeant?"

He considered lying, then didn't. "No, I'm just a bachelor. Live alone, except for my cat."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with being a bachelor," she said.

They reached the end of a block and crossed the intersection. A light wind blew, carrying with it a chill. Summer wasn't here yet. A green car slid past. Smith saw a man in dark glasses who appeared to glance at them as he drove by. The front door of a house opened and a stout woman in a bathrobe stooped to pick up her morning paper, then disappeared behind the door. A dove, surprised by their relatively silent approach, flew suddenly into the air with a startled noise.

"Guess I'll get up some speed," he said. "Well, see you again, maybe."

"Nice talking to you," she said.

He pedaled away.

It was ten degrees colder the next morning, with an overcast sky that threatened rain. Even though Smith wore a lined jacket over a wool sweater, the wind blowing past his ears was painful and it seemed to cut through the lining and wool to his skin. The woman in the red sweatsuit came jogging out of her driveway and into the street as he started down the long hill toward her house. At the bottom he braked and drew even with her.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't figure you'd be out today, in this weather."

"Oh, I'm a hearty soul," he said. "Even so, I think I'm going to cut it short today. It's really bothering my ears."

"Why don't you come back and have a cup of coffee with me? I don't think I want to brave it this morning, either."

"You think you ought to invite a strange man into your house, with all the break-ins they've been having around here?"

"But you're not a strange man, you're a policeman."

"You're on."

He followed her to her house and left his bike by the back door, noticing that the rear of the place was protected by thick-trunked trees and dense shrubbery. As she led him inside he observed the

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door—not even a deadbolt lock, just a simple push-button built into the door handle. And there were glass panes in the upper half of the door. He could break out a windowpane and unlock it from the inside, or easily jimmy the lock.

The kitchen was warm and cozy. The woman put a kettle on a gas burner and smiled at him. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to get out of this sweatsuit. By the way, my name's Helen—Helen Patillo."

"Okay, Helen. I'll just sit here at the table and wait. Nice place you've got here."

"Thanks. I'll be right back."

He hung his jacket over the back of a chair and sat with his elbows propped on the kitchen table, scanning the room. The window over the sink was vulnerable, but with the back door so easy there was no reason to bother with a window. He got up and prowled around, checking the window and door more closely. Helen came in and he turned. She'd changed into jeans and a plaid shirt.

"I was just checking your place over," he said. "Have you got any kind of alarm system?"

"To tell you the truth, we don't. Once in a while Mark—that's my husband—mentions it, but we've just never gotten around to it."

"Well, I wouldn't worry too much about it. Actually this place looks pretty solid."

"I hope so."

"You don't keep a lot of valuables around, do you? Jewelry, stuff like that?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I do have a little cardboard box on my bedroom dresser." She pointed to indicate the door she'd just come out of. "I've got some things in it I'd hate to lose, but it's a really harmless-looking little box. I can't imagine a burglar even noticing it."

"Well, you can't be too careful," he said sternly. "What's in it, anyway?"

"Oh—my diamond ring. I don't wear it around much, not just to do housework. A gold watch my aunt gave me for a wedding present. And, oh, yes, the necklace I inherited from my grandmother."

"Necklace?"

"It's really the only big deal in there—a sort of heirloom, you know. All kinds of tiny little diamonds and rubies on it. I *never* wear it." She shrugged. "Other than that, there's really nothing in the house worth taking. Mark and I aren't rich. We're not even well off."

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The kettle whistled. Helen spooned instant coffee into two mugs and added boiling water to each, then sat opposite Smith at the table.

"Now tell me about you," she said. "How long have you been a policeman?"

"Well, let's see now. It'll be ten years next month." He lied smoothly, with a perfectly innocent face. It was something he'd always been able to do.

"It must be exciting work."

"I'll tell you. I think my line of work is one of the most exciting you can get." And he wasn't lying about that.

She smiled and they chatted about other things while he finished his coffee. After a while he thanked her and got up to put on his jacket.

"Stop in again some time," she told him, as he walked out the back door and headed for his bicycle.

"Thanks. You sure your husband doesn't mind?"

"Of course not. Why should he? After all, if you can't trust a policeman, who can you trust?"

He grinned and waved goodbye, then climbed onto the seat of the ten-speed and pedaled down the driveway and out into the street. It was only slightly warmer, and he decided to head for home immediately. Head down, eyes squinted against the chill breeze that now blew directly into his face, he paid no attention to the green car that passed him going the other way. Its driver wore dark glasses.

It was even colder the next morning. At the top of the hill Smith, hunched in his jacket, watched Helen jog away from her house and trot to the intersection, rounding the corner to the left. He gave her time to get another half block, then rode fast down the steep hill, and turned his bike into her driveway immediately. No one was around. The large trees and shrubs at the back of the house, though leafless as yet, nevertheless provided a good screen against any peering eyes.

He worked fast. It took him only twelve seconds to cut out a pane of glass, reach through, and unlock the door. And he was inside.

It was going to be an easy job. He went directly to the bedroom and there, just as Helen had described, he found a cardboard box containing a diamond ring, a gold watch, and a necklace. He looked them over for a moment; the ring's diamond was small, and the watch was one of those tiny ladies' things, though it would probably

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be worth a hundred. But the necklace was more than he'd bargained for—he couldn't even begin to count the number of stones glinting in green and red and yellow. A real haul, this one.

He shoved the three items into his jacket pocket and hurried back into the kitchen. The secret of this kind of operation was speed. You got in fast, you got out fast, and it was over before anyone had a chance to notice you. Only about two minutes had elapsed from the time he'd leaned his bike against a tree trunk outside the back door. Crossing the kitchen in a few strides, he went out the door, took one step toward his bicycle—and stopped cold.

Standing near the bike, facing him, were a man and a woman. The woman was Helen, with a strange expression on her face, wearing her jogging suit. The man next to her was tall, had on a suit and tie, and wore a pair of dark glasses.

A green car was parked in the driveway. It looked familiar.

The man was pointing a .38 at Smith. Its hammer was back.

"What is this?" Smith demanded, trying to brazen it out.

"You want to put your hands up?" the man said pleasantly.

"I didn't fall for that fake badge," Helen said. "Not the way you fell for that fake necklace."

Smith glared at her. "Who the hell is he?"

"Oh—meet my husband Mark, Mr. Smith. Better known as Detective Lieutenant Mark Patillo, City Police. His badge is real." Then she flashed him her big smile; somehow, it lacked its previous warmth.

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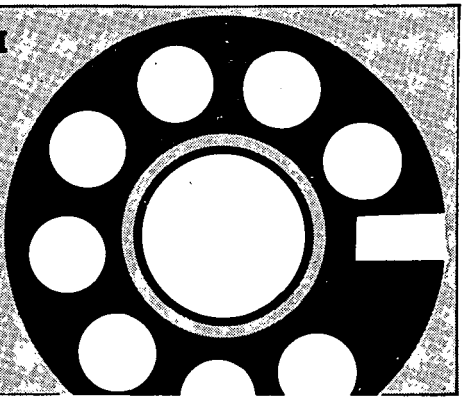

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a ***NEW*** **detective story by**

ROBERT TWOHY

Robert Twohy has a deep feeling, an empathy, for the so-called dregs of society, especially the regulars at Pete's Place, in Lindenvale, San Francisco Bay area. Getting old and sick and desperate is big trouble when it's "nearly past closing time," and all you may be able to do in extremis is to follow the thread of a notion . . .

THE MAN IN THE RATTY OVERCOAT

by ROBERT TWOHY

I was the only customer in Pete's Place, looking over the afternoon *Examiner*, when Howell came in, buttoned to the chops in his old gray overcoat though the weather was typical Bay area springtime. But most of us oldsters have at least one weird quirk or habit—Howell's was wearing that ratty overcoat, come rain or come shine.

He took the stool next to me, ordered a bottle of ale from Chris, and told me he was just back from County Hospital.

"Doctor told me in four months I'll be dead."

You reach his age, or mine, and it's nearly past closing time. So all he got for this news was a murmur of condolence.

He took down some ale. "Okay by me—all I got now is pain." He touched his stomach area, screwed up his face a second. Then, "All I'm sorry about is I can't leave anything for Edna. That's my daughter."

"I didn't know you had one."

"I hardly did either. Haven't seen her in years."

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"Where's she live?" He wanted to talk, so the least I could do was feed him some lines.

"Idaho somewhere, some dumb little town. A waitress, last I heard." Dismal shake of the head. "She had brains—should have gone to college, had a career, but what'd I ever do to help her?"

I didn't know. He told me. "Nothing. Not one damn thing. All wrapped up in my own life—I was a steelworker, y'know." A touch of pride in his voice—why not? It's a good trade, and he was probably good at it. "Worked hard, sure, but had my fun. Wanted to do something I'd do it—no thought of anyone else. Hunting trips. I'd tell the wife, the kid, g'bye, I'm off." Muddy brown eyes lightened a little—he'd hit on a good memory. "Ever show you my deer rifle?"

"No, but you've told me about it."

"I still have it. Keep it on a shelf in my room."

I'd heard that too.

"Got a lot of deer with that old Springfield." A dim smile, remembering the good times, then a shake of the head, a long sigh, and his eyes went muddy again. "No thoughts for Edna. Now I'll not see her again. Not in this world."

He looked far away, maybe as far as Idaho. Maybe seeing his brainy daughter, gaunt and beat, hobbling on swollen ankles between tables in a grubby joint in some dumb town.

He muttered, "Wish I could do one last decent thing for her."

The conversation lay where it had dropped. I said nothing to revive it.

He drank, blew a few more sighs, then his glance slid down to the paper in front of me, open to the entertainment page—I'd had the idea I might treat myself to a big night at the movies.

He laid a finger on the paper. "There's a guy I like."

His finger was on the photo of a big Hollywood name, a guy who had become venerable, if that's the word, by outlasting nearly all the actors he'd started out with umpteen years ago. He looked good—lean features, silvery hair, warm and kindly eyes. Like mine would be if I had ten million in the bank and good-fitting dentures.

"People used to say I looked like him, kind of."

People had been putting him on. Or he was putting *me* on. But he looked like he believed it.

He glanced under the picture at the article that went with it. I thought, no need he should get a crick in his neck. "Here." I pushed the paper in front of him.

He picked it up, read under the fold—and something happened.

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His profile stayed the same—soggy, drooping—but the eye I saw was suddenly clear of murk. Like something he'd read had cleared it.

I hadn't read the article. I'd just turned to the movie listings when he'd come in.

He pushed back on his stool, head up now, staring over the back bar. For a full minute he was like that, eye still wide and clear. Then he turned to the wall clock, which said 2:12.

Though his bottle was still half full he got off the stool, picked up my paper, shoved it under his arm, and was away before I had time to ask if I could look at what was playing at the local Fox. Things happen too fast for me, sometimes. He was gone out the door, moving like there was something important to be done.

I had another beer, gave Chris a see-you-later, and left. Got a new paper and sat down on one of the stone benches along Linden Avenue, the main drag, curious to see if I could spot what had suddenly cleared the murk from Howell's eye.

But first I checked what was at the Fox. Which settled my plans for the evening. I'd find an old movie on TV, then try for a night's sleep—which I get about three nights a month. Insomnia is one of aging's fringe benefits.

Then I settled down to read the article Howell had read.

It was an interview, starting off with a mention that the actor was currently delighting San Francisco theater-goers in a revival of a great old play which he had starred in a movie version of, some thirty years ago, long before he got venerable (if that's the word). The play was at one of the city's most elegant old theaters.

—Do you like to come to San Francisco?

—Love to. This is my favorite city.

So they all say—for the SF papers. I guess they use the same line in Cleveland or Waco. Why not? Better than "*GAAAH*! I hate this burg!"

—Which do you prefer, the stage or pictures?

That's apples and oranges. But I've never got over the thrill of playing before a live audience . . .

And so on. I've yet to read of an actor in a play bad-mouthing plays.

—You seem to be in superb health.

—I watch my diet, exercise regularly—I expect to be around many years more. And I'd like to say this—and I guess it answers your

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earlier question—when my time comes I hope that the last breath I take will be on a great stage.

—By that you mean—

—I mean that when my curtain finally rings down, I hope it's on the stage of a great historic old theater, before a wonderful audience, in the middle of the finest performance that is in me.

There was more to the interview—some of it interesting, some reasonably silly—but under the baloney that actors give out as naturally as working guys sweat, he seemed a decent, upstanding citizen. The look his eyes had wasn't a fake.

I ran my eyes down the page and there was the ad for his show, listing starting time—8:00 P.M., of course—and price—$14 to $30 tops.

Wow.

I forgot the actor, forgot Howell and his forlorn daughter. My mind spun back to the first time I'd taken in a top-rated stage show . . .

That was back in New York when I was twenty-two and had a blind date with a young woman named Susan. A $10 bill got us good seats and left enough so we filled up after, on Chinese food.

Bobby Clark was the star, the guy with the painted-on glasses. A great comedian. Laugh? Everyone was laughing but I didn't hear the others. All I heard was Susan's laughter, like sweet bells.

I was broke till next payday but that night was special, the start of something that would have gone on being wonderful, and on and on, if she hadn't got that cough. That's all it was at first—just a cough . . .

Well, at age seventy-one I don't have too much time left before I see her again—which though I don't deserve it, I'm just about certain is going to happen.

But memory jaunts aren't what you should be off on, when crossing downtown streets, even in a smallish burg like Lindenvale. So I concentrated on the here and now and after four blocks got to my roominghouse.

A couple of thick legs hung into the living room, the rest of Mrs. Mustie being outside an open window on the sill of which was balanced a pail full of soapy water. She had a rag and was swabbing the glass and scowling through swabs. I gave her a wave which got me a scowl back. She meant nothing personal by it, it was her way of looking at all her tenants.

I went to the hall, took the phone off the wall, and got the number

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of the theater from Information, which was in the ad of course but I'd left the paper back on the bench. Getting old is getting forgetful.

I got my dime back, chipped it back with another dime, dialed, and when a voice came on I asked, "Any seats available?"

"For what performance?"

"How about tonight?"

"We have some good singles in the balcony."

"Could I make a reservation?"

"Sorry, no phone reservations. But if you come right down to the ticket office in the lobby, you should be able to get one."

"I'm calling from Lindenvale."

"Well, I can't guarantee tonight, but if you drive right in you probably—"

"Well, thanks, but I'm not sure about tonight."

I hung up, not sure about anything. Maybe I was just imagining what that intense look in Howell's eye had meant—or that it meant anything at all. But if you're old, with nothing to do, you've got time to follow the thread of a notion.

I knew where he lived—a place like mine, two blocks away.

He wasn't home, Lang said. He was clipping the hedge in front. He said that Howell had come in, made a phone call, gone to his room for a little, then gone out again.

"Did he say where he was going?"

Lang looked surprised, as if any of us antiques would bother to say where we were going—who would care? "No, 'course not." He went on trimming.

"Was he carrying anything?"

"What?"

"I dunno. Anything."

"Why should he be?"

"I dunno. Was he?"

"No."

All right, that settled that. I'd been off on a tangent and it had petered out. A good thing, too.

I turned away, then turned back. "Can I wait for him in his room?"

"What for?"

"Oh, no special reason. He says it's a real nice room." I didn't want to let Lang, a sourball I don't like, know what was on my mind.

I tried a winning smile, which paid no dividends. He growled, "Wait out here. I don't let people in tenants' rooms."

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I nodded, turned away. He said, "It might rile him up—he's not a well man."

"I know."

"He's all shot inside and he's got a bad leg."

That was news. I hadn't known he had a leg problem.

"When he went out he was walking real stiff," Lang said.

"Which leg?"

"I dunno—what's the difference?"

"None I guess. Was he walking like that when he came in?"

"How would I know? I was in the kitchen, heard him at the phone, then he went upstairs. Came out twenty minutes later and was limping. All the way up the street."

I looked up Dorst Street, which ends two blocks toward town at the old-style SP depot.

"Did you ask him what was the matter?"

"Why should I?" He went back to his hedge.

I said, "I'll look for him uptown," and I walked up to the depot. I didn't think Howell had a bad leg, but my own were aching pretty good, as they do when I walk more than usual.

At the depot I looked inside at the clock, which said 3:35. Then I studied the timetable stuck on the window, which told me that the most recent northbound train had stopped at Lindenvale at 3:27, due in the city at 3:49.

I sat down on the bench and thought, you've really gone senile at last. You want some zip in your otherwise pointless life, so you're letting this goofy notion carry you away. Go to the Moonduster or the Club Tropical and he'll be at one of them, drinking ale, and he'll tell you how he tripped on the curb or something, wrenched his knee . . .

—We'd seen "Streets of Havoc" and Susan had said, as we walked home, "All that tough confidence he puts on is acting. His eyes show that inside he's a gentle person."

Which was a word you didn't use about men in those days—no real man wanted to be called that. But Susan wasn't making fun of the actor—she really liked him, enjoyed him on the screen as I did, was sure he was a fine person in real life . . .

So what was the worst thing that could happen to me? I'd make a fool of myself? Hell, I've done that plenty in my life—what's one more time at this late date?

I got up and was surprised that my legs didn't feel too bad—they

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moved me at a fair clip from the depot to the Club Tropical, where Howell wasn't.

A block down Lawton to the Moonduster. Shirley gave me a hi, I gave it back. No Howell.

I walked to Insular Avenue, continued a block and a half to the stone steps that lead up to the Police Department.

One of two women sitting at desks came over to the counter. I asked if Lieutenant Birkell was in. He's an older plainclothes guy who comes in Pete's and shoots pretty good pool. A quiet, nice guy.

She went away down a corridor and I sat on one of the chairs in a row at the side and in a little while Tom Birkell came out, a big guy with a pleasant face. He said my name and asked how was I. I said okay, and that I wanted to talk to him about something.

"You want to go to a room?"

"This is okay." The women were ticking away on typewriters and not hearing.

He sat down in the chair next to me.

"You know Howell? Comes into Pete's?"

"The one always wears the buttoned-up overcoat?"

"That's him." I took a few breaths, getting things straight in my mind so I could lay out my notion without a lot of hemming and backtracking.

"He has an old Springfield rifle. I think he's got it under his coat, the business end tied to his leg, which is why he was walking stiff when he went out. Which is what his landlord told me, but a little earlier he was walking all right. And he'd read about this famous actor who's in a play in the city—I think he called the theater and took the 3:27 up so he'd be sure to get a ticket, and he'll hang around in the city till the play starts and then be up in the balcony somewhere, and he used to be a pretty good deer hunter . . . I think he's gone up to shoot the actor."

He heard all this and his face didn't show much which it never does, even when in a money game he scratches on the eight-ball. But his eyes showed he was considering everything I'd said.

He was quiet a while and I was too, thinking I'd said enough till he said something. We looked at each other. Then he asked in his low voice, "Why?"

"He's dying. His daughter's a waitress in Idaho with bum ankles. She must be kind of old for it, but he wants to leave her some money so she can go to college and have a better life."

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He rubbed his jaw and said, in the same low voice, "You been drinking?"

"Two beers at Pete's, hour and a half ago."

"What do you mean, he's dying?"

"He was down at County today and the doctor said it's hopeless. Four months at the most."

"Who's the actor?"

I told him.

"What's he to Howell?"

"I dunno. I mean I'm just guessing. Howell thinks he used to look like him. He likes him. There's an interview in today's *Examiner* and in it the actor says that when he dies he hopes it'll be in a fine old theater in the middle of a great performance. The play's at a fine old theater, and San Francisco's his favorite city—so he says, anyway."

He was quiet some more. Then he shook his head a little and gave me a slow smile. "So you think Howell intends to do him the favor?"

"I know—it sounds crazy. But most of us are crazy, more or less. We get old and everything's changed, and we think there's a last important thing we should do—and crazy thoughts come into our heads, and sometimes we act them out . . . It's a real rifle he owns."

He'd stopped smiling, thinking I guess of the murders that happen, coming from nowhere, people killing people they hate, or don't care much about, or even admire a lot. I said, "Motive? Maybe to get stories. Exclusive stories that a TV network or a big magazine or paper might pay for. Maybe movie rights. It sounds like I'm joking but I'm not. You read about things—like that guy in Utah selling rights to the story of his execution. Howell wants to do something for his daughter, and the actor said he hopes he'll bow out during a performance, and Howell likes him—sure it's crazy. Most reasons for murder are, aren't they?"

He nodded, looking off. "You say he went up to the city with his Springfield?"

"I don't know—Lang wouldn't let me look in his room. Maybe it's still there. If it is I've made a fool of myself—which is okay with me if I have."

I had a sudden flash, which comes sometimes. Susan's face, bright and clear, like she was there next to me. Her green eyes were warm, she was smiling at me.

Then she was gone but that was all right, because I'm just about positive I'll be seeing her soon. Just as she was.

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Birkell got up. "You want to show me where Howell lives?"

We went in a police car to Lang's. He'd finished the hedge and answered the door. He listened to Birkell, who showed his badge and didn't say anything definite, then we all went upstairs. Howell's room wasn't locked and we went in. We looked on the one shelf and there was nothing on it.

It was a neat room without much furniture to look behind or under. A small closet had nothing in it but a pair of pants on a hanger, some underwear and socks folded on a box.

Lang growled, "What'd he do *that* for?"

He was pointing to the narrow bed, which was neatly made, with the sheet folded over the blanket. But a strip about three feet long and a foot wide had been ripped from the end of the sheet on our side.

Birkell rubbed his jaw, then looked at me. "Maybe a sling inside his coat?"

"Could be. Folded or rolled, then pinned to the lining."

"Yeah. Using part of it for the sling, the rest to tie around his leg."

We looked around on all the neat surfaces, and in the drawer of the little table, but didn't find any pins. Which proved nothing one way or another.

"How about my sheet?" Lang whined.

I said, "It looks ripped."

We went out.

Back in the car Birkell looked at his watch, and I looked too. Getting on toward 5:00.

He said, "Let's try the bars again."

So we hit the three bars, which are the working-men's bars in Lindenvale, and he wasn't in any of them and we got no word on where he might be.

Back in the car Birkell asked, "How about Senior Citizens?"

"I've never known him to go there."

We looked anyway. No Howell.

Birkell sat at the wheel and tapped it and worked his lips in and out, which he does when figuring a pool shot that could be played several ways.

"He's dying, you say . . . I'd rather not make a big thing of it, if we don't have to." I'd known him in Pete's as a low-pressure guy. Apparently he was the same way on the job.

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"And maybe there's nothing to it at all. Maybe he took the rifle to pawn, or to show somebody."

I nodded. It was possible.

"I'd rather not get the SF cops in on it, unless it comes to no choice. If he *did* go up to shoot the actor, d'you think he might try it before the show?"

"You mean, like hang around the hotel? I wouldn't think so. The actor said he wanted to bow out onstage—more drama that way too, more press and TV excitement—bigger chance of a good payoff, he'd figure, for the daughter."

He thought a while, then picked up his radio dingus, and said he was going to the city on local business.

They buzzed at him if he wanted any help. He said no.

He turned to me. "Want to come?"

I wanted. Despite the extra walking I'd done, my legs weren't bothering me now at all.

We took the freeway to the city, which was the usual rush-hour horror. We got in the middle of the mess, north on Market and west of Grant, and stop-and-go'd along with the rest of the cattle. We passed Union Square and Birkell swung into a parking garage, easing around the sign at the entrance that said FULL. He got out and in his amiable way talked to the guy there while I waited, then nodded me out of the car, and the guy came over and got in and drove it up a ramp. We walked out and there was the theater up the block.

6:20. He said, "Let's see what's going on."

Nothing was. The box office was closed and a sign said that tonight was sold out, all seats, and the lobby ticket office would be open 10:00 A.M. for future shows. The glass doors to the lobby were locked and we didn't see anyone inside.

I wondered if Howell had got there in time to buy a ticket for tonight. Maybe he'd had to settle for tomorrow night. Or maybe he'd never taken the train to the city at all—was still back in Lindenvale, in somebody's house, showing some guy his good old gun that in the old days he'd dropped so many deer with.

Birkell muttered, "Doors won't open till after 7:00. Could be a sudden mob and we'd miss him. If we don't spot him before the show, I'll have to get the SF cops in on it—which I'd rather not."

He was looking across the street. "That restaurant—we can see from there if we get a window seat. I didn't have any lunch. You feel like a sandwich?"

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"Looks kind of expensive."

"Police business." He gave his slow smile. "Lindenvale pays."

We jaywalked through stalled traffic lines, me thinking a corned beef on rye wouldn't hurt, and wondering if Lindenvale could stand a beer along with it.

A beer . . . an ale . . .

I stopped. "Wait a sec."

Birkell stepped back from the door and his eyebrows went up in a question.

"If he got a ticket for tonight, he wouldn't go far. Not limping along with a rifle tied to him. Wouldn't likely take a bus, too crowded, might get bumped into, somebody yells he's got a gun. Maybe a cab but—I think he'd stay close. Go to a place he could sit off by himself, leg stretched out, not be noticed."

He nodded. "Bench at Union Square, maybe."

"More likely a bar."

"But not on this block." He looked down the block at the fancy booze places.

"No, that ratty old coat would stand out like a headlight—no, he wouldn't want that. He'd want a dump."

He nodded, rubbed his jaw. "Tenderloin's not far."

It wasn't. The stylish street we were on was a couple of blocks up from the probably crummiest section of the city.

We walked south down those blocks, walked past a flophouse and a radio-repair shop, and turned into a dump. He wasn't there.

We hit three more. We'd covered the north side of the block. More signs, promising bright doings inside, beckoned us west.

But Birkell motioned across the street. "If he wants to stay close, this block is closest. Let's check the other side before we go any farther."

My legs were hurting some, but not much. I felt excitement, and at the same time a sense that likely nothing was going to come of all this tramping around. Howell was probably back in his room, the rifle back on the shelf.

We turned into a dump that featured chili, according to the sign stuck on the mirror. The local news was loud on the color TV. A fair mix of Tenderloin types leaned on the bar and sat at tables, drinking beer, a few slurping up chili. The aroma was combined beer, smoke, chili, sweat, fear—and suicide.

Birkell stopped, took my arm. He was looking off to a dark side of the place.

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I looked, took in air, blew it out, and nodded.

We went over. Howell was sitting alone at a table, his left side stiff, shoulder twisted back, his left leg sticking out and to the side. Nobody was near, nobody was looking. He'd found a place he could be not noticed.

He had a bottle of ale in front of him and the remains of a bowl of chili.

His eyes had been clear, first glance up at me, then they got muddy. They switched to Birkell and got muddier. Under the mud the look was like he'd known all the time his plan would get shot down.

Birkell said, "You know me?"

Nod.

"You got a rifle under your coat?"

Nod.

"Loaded?"

"Yeah."

"Want to give it to me?"

We stood there as sitting stiff, he stretched both hands down below his left knee, fiddled there for a bit, under the flap of his coat. Then his left hand came up with a rolled strip of Lang's ripped sheet. As it did there was a soft clunk which I guessed was the barrel of the Springfield hitting against the edge of the chair seat.

He dropped the strip and leaned forward, slid his left foot back and forth on the floor, working the knee, rubbing it, then looked up. "First I've bent that leg since leaving my room."

Birkell said, "If you kind of take your coat off around the rifle, it won't show when you pass it to me."

Suddenly the murky eyes showed a glint of fear. Something else too—shame.

I remembered that back in his closet I hadn't seen any shirts. Or sweaters. One pair of pants on a hanger.—Old guys get odd and Howell was one of the odder ones. So he would spend money for ale but make up for it by not buying clothes. Even thrift-store clothes. That was his economy system, how he got by. He proably had only one shirt, which he was wearing now, which probably looked awful. Which was why he always kept his overcoat buttoned up to the neck, come rain or come shine. And now Birkell had asked him to take it off. And he was ashamed to show what was under it.

He said in a whisper, "I don't want to do that."

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Birkell looked at him. He has those eyes that take in a lot, and a mind that puts things together.

He said in his low voice, "Okay. Just pull the rifle out and hand it to me under the table."

Howell's eyes softened to a look of relief. He reached both hands between buttons to his left side and slowly pulled the rifle out of the sling he had in there, passing his hands down it till he had it balanced. What he was doing was pretty visible if anyone was looking, but nobody seemed to be. When the rifle was balanced he bent and reached it under the table.

Birkell bent, took it in both hands, and laid it on the floor under the table. Straightening, he looked at me. "Better I don't carry it up the street—might turn into a production. Will you wait here? We'll go get the car and come back."

"Sure." I took a chair at the table.

Howell took a swallow of his ale, then got up. He went with Birkell, limping some.

I sat at the table and waited. Nobody paid any attention to me. The local news ground on, and the guys kept their eyes on it, hoping to see something exciting. But apparently nothing spectacular had happened or was happening in the city.

Birkell came back, and I picked up the rifle, got some of it under my jacket, and the lieutenant put his big body close on that side. We went out, and nobody seemed to notice me walking out with a rifle.

The car was out front in the red zone and Howell was in the front seat. I got in back, laying the rifle on the floor.

We drove through slow traffic and on the sidewalk well-dressed people were walking, heading toward the theater, having parked as close as they could find parking. They'd stop at the various fancy bars near the theater and have a drink or two and then it would be time for the play, and they'd be able to say afterward that they'd seen the famous actor in person, in a fine performance at that great historic old theater.

An upstanding, decent guy—and if he wasn't Olivier, he'd given people a lot of honest pleasure—and would go on doing it for a long time to come. Because like he'd said, he watched his diet and exercised.

Which should get you a long life—if nothing comes at you from off some wall.

Birkell dropped us off in front of Lang's.

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Howell asked the lieutenant, "You arresting me?"

"What for?"

"You know what for."

"Nothing happened."

"I meant it to happen. And I was concealing a deadly weapon."

"Yeah, you shouldn't do that. You better let me take care of it."

"I'll be going in the hospital soon."

"I know."

"I'd like to send it to Edna. She might get a few bucks for it. Real fine gun. Got a lot of deer in its time."

Howell turned to me. "I like the guy. He said it was what he wanted. He did say that, didn't he?"

I nodded.

He turned to Birkell and said, "I'll stop by and maybe we can talk about how to get the rifle to Edna."

"Sure. Any time."

"Maybe she'll get a few bucks for it."

Birkell nodded.

Howell went up the stairs, not limping now.

As he got to the top, the door opened and Lang's mean squawk sounded. "Why'd you rip my good sheet?"

We watched Howell walk past him. The door closed.

Birkell dropped me off at my place. He gave his slow smile, a short wave. I gave them back. He drove off toward the station.

I went to my room, watched a dumb movie for a while, then switched it off, lay in bed, thought a while—not about Howell, or his daughter, or Birkell, or the actor. No—about good things of the past. When everything was warm and wonderful.

G'night, Susan.

I had a very good sleep that night.

"Q"

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a *NEW* crime story by

PATRICIA MOYES

The dazzling Caribbean, with its brilliant sun, sparkling sea, bright and shining beaches, can have its Stygian side—especially at five o'clock in the morning on a remote West Indian island . . .

BEYOND THE REEF

by PATRICIA MOYES

It was the best sort of Caribbean day—and days do not come much better than that. Brilliant sun sparkled on brilliant sea, white sails leaned to a briskly steady breeze, and on the crescent of the white-coral sand beach in front of the Hawksworth Inn, sunbathers roasted themslves to a golden brown, basted with coconut oil, while swimmers splashed merrily and schools of snorkelers explored the multi-colored wonders of the reef.

All this, however, brought no comfort to Claire Hawksworth, as she sat in her office at the hotel, gazing moodily out at the gardens ablaze with hibuscus, toward the sea beyond.

At last she said, "She can't live forever."

"She seems to be having a good try at it," remarked her companion, Dave Brigham. He was the manager of the Hawksworth Inn, and Claire the widowed owner. They were referring to Miss Alicia Hawksworth, aunt of Claire's late husband Giles—an extremely wealthy old lady who made no secret of the fact that she had willed all her money to Claire and the Hawksworth Inn.

Claire sighed, remembering. Everything had started off so well, from the time when she had become secretary to and finally married Giles Hawksworth in London fifteen years ago. Giles was a chartered accountant—not, Claire suspected, a brilliant one, but full of charm and with Aunt Alicia always in the background to provide. Yes, life

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had been fun and uncomplicated then—parties, shopping sprees, Caribbean holidays.

Then, after five years of marriage, Giles—still only in his thirties—had developed rheumatoid arthritis. The pain grew more severe, he became less and less mobile, and he reacted badly to the drugs prescribed. If only, said his doctors, he could move out of cold, clammy London to a permanently warm climate, if possible by the sea.

Naturally both Claire and Giles had thought at once of their favorite island, and Aunt Alicia was enthusiastic. Giles could not bear to be idle for the rest of his life, and there would hardly be enough work on Palm Island to keep an accountant busy; but there was a small hotel for sale. Aunt Alicia gave Giles the money, and he bought the place. Her only condition was that the name should be changed from Smugglers Cove to the Hawksworth Inn. Claire, twenty-five years old and very pretty, would make a perfect hostess, while Giles's expertise in accountancy would take care of the business side of things. An ideal arrangement.

Aunt Alicia's insistence on the the change of name was significant. Unmarried herself, she had what amounted to a near-mania about the Hawksworth family. She had only two surviving relatives—her late brother's sons, Giles and Patrick. Fortunately for Claire and Giles, Aunt Alicia had always disliked Patrick. First, she had reproached him bitterly for not marrying, and then—when he finally did—had taken a violent dislike to his wife, Sheila. This was mainly but not entirely because Sheila from the outset had announced her intention of remaining childless. She was a busy journalist, Patrick a successful lawyer, they had all the money they needed, and neither wanted a family. For some years Aunt Alicia had not written to or visited Patrick and Sheila.

Claire knew that Alicia Hawksworth had never really forgiven her, Claire, for not having children either—even though doctors had proved that the fault did not lie with her. Nevertheless, making the best of a bad situation, Aunt Alicia had left her fortune to Giles, and the Hawksworth Inn was to provide the family with at least a sort of immortality.

At first the venture had prospered. The Inn was charming—a cluster of individual cottages scattered in tropical gardens around a beautiful and protected beach. Giles renovated the cottages, engaged a fine chef, and hired the island's best gardeners to turn the grounds into a showplace. Caribbean tourism was on the upswing,

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and the Hawksworth Inn swung up with it. It quickly gained a reputation among rich and discriminating Americans, and was nearly always full. Needless to say, Giles kept the accounts impeccably, and soon the Inn was making a good profit.

Once a year, in February, Aunt Alicia came out and stayed for a month in the finest of the beachside cottages. She would have spent more time there, she confided to Claire, had it not been for her cats, whom she missed grievously, even though they were left in the loving and capable hands of her housekeeper, Mrs. Bradley. Yes, those had been good days, too.

And then, two years ago and with devastating suddenness, Giles died of a heart attack, and Claire was left to run the Hawksworth Inn on her own. Aunt Alicia had assured her that she need not worry. The money that would have come to Giles would be hers eventually, so that she could always carry on the Inn. If Patrick and that selfish, spoiled wife of his had had children, things might have been different, but now it was Claire and the Inn who were to perpetuate the name of Hawksworth.

It is possible to feel sorry for Claire, and to understand how she came to get involved with Dave Brigham. There are Dave Brighams all over the Caribbean—white men, drifters, superficially attractive, living by their wits, dropouts from the workaday world. A rich, attractive widow with a hotel of her own was exactly what Dave was looking for. He became first her friend, then her lover, and finally her manager.

Claire had been coping as best she could with the complications of hotel finance, but Dave assured her that he would take all that burdensome work off her shoulders. He did. He also took the profits, made a horrendous mess of management, and became his own best customer at the bar. Soon the hotel, although outwardly prosperous, was in dire financial straits. Claire did not dare appeal to Aunt Alicia, and so reluctantly fell in with Dave's scheme to raise a mortgage. And another. And another. Now things were really desperate, and the only thing that could save the Inn was Aunt Alicia's money. She was eighty-five and could not live forever—but, as Dave remarked, she was having a good try at it.

Alicia Hawksworth was a spry, wiry, featherweight old lady, full of energy and fit as a fiddle. Every morning while she was at the Inn she took a swim before breakfast, jogged on the beach before lunch, and took another swim after her short postprandial siesta. Claire could see her now, wading skinnily out of the water and onto

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the beach. There seemed no reason why she should not live for another twenty years. Still, at the very worst, Aunt Alicia and her money were still there. As a last resort, Claire could confess her mismanagement and her financial predicament (no mention of her personal relationship with Dave, of course). Surely Aunt Alicia would not let the Inn die.

The postal system of remote islands is inclined to be primitive. Letters from Europe and the United States arrive by a series of carriers, starting off with jet airliners, and ending up with unpredictable small boats. However, after about two weeks, they generally turn up around six o'clock in the evening.

It was before the mail had come in—at about a quarter to six—that Claire came into the bar to find Aunt Alicia sitting at a table with a couple of wealthy American holiday-makers with whom she had struck up a friendship. There was nothing odd about this, except perhaps that the American gentleman was just replacing a gold ballpoint pen in his shirt pocket, and that Aunt Alicia was tucking a letter of some sort into a large Air Mail envelope. However, Alicia started almost guiltily when Claire came in, then murmured thanks to her American friends, rose to her feet and trotted over to Claire.

"My dear," she said. "Such news! I have been looking for you to tell you but you were not in your office."

"I was—checking supplies." said Claire.

"Well, now, let us go to your office and I will explain. It is so exciting! I know you will be as pleased as I am."

In the office Aunt Alicia said breathlessly, "This afternoon I received a telephone call from Patrick. Your brother-in-law, you know."

Claire just looked at her. Alicia went on, "The most wonderful news! The thing I have been waiting for all my life, and never thought would happen. Sheila has had a baby! A son! Patrick telephoned me at home, and Mrs. Bradley gave him this number."

Still Claire found nothing to say.

"Now, Claire dear, I don't want you to be upset, and I know you will understand that the Hawksworth money belongs by moral right to the Hawksworth heir. And I can see that you have no need of it—your hotel is running splendidly, my dear. You must be making a very good profit. So I have written to Patrick and Sheila telling them that everything I have—well, almost everything—will be put in trust for the baby. And I have written to Mr. Bridgenorth, my solicitor, changing my will. You *do* understand, don't you, my dear?"

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Faintly Claire said, "I thought a will had to be drawn up by a lawyer—"

"Oh, no, dear Claire. This is quite legal. I got those two nice Americans to witness my signature. It may not be written on the usual legal form, but I can assure you that it is a valid will. It will go off on the boat tomorrow morning, and will certainly reach England before I do." Miss Hawksworth was on the second day of her holiday. "You do see why I must do this, Claire dear? Naturally, you will get something—three thousand and some of my jewelry . . ."

Claire forced her frozen face into a smile. Three thousand. She needed at least fifty thousand. "Of course I understand, Aunt Alicia. I must write and congratulate Patrick and Sheila."

Aunt Alicia smiled indulgently. "I knew you would understand, my dear. Patrick was quite droll on the telephone," she went on. "He kept saying 'Sheila's furious. It was just a mistake, but we didn't find out in time.' Just a mistake, indeed!"

"A mistake, indeed," thought Claire grimly. Aloud she said, "Well, I'd better go and see what's happening in the kitchen."

Later, after Aunt Alicia had gone to bed, Claire walked past the desk where guests left their mail to be stamped and collected by the early boat. There were three letters in Aunt Alicia's characteristic hand. One to Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Hawksworth. One to H. Bridgenorth Esq., of Messrs. Bridgenorth, Simpson and Penworthy. And one to Mrs. Bradley at Aunt Alicia's home address. Let that one go—having a lovely time, hope the cats are well. Claire glanced quickly around to make sure that nobody was in sight, and slipped the other two letters into her pocket. Then she went to find Dave.

"You had the sense to take the letters?" was his first question.

"Of course."

"The mails take so long, she won't expect a reply to reach her here. But suppose she phones or sends a telegram?"

Claire shook her head. "Not legally binding," she said. "But that document would be. A will can be written on anything, so long as it's dated and witnessed and states that it supercedes all previous wills." She half smiled. "I went through it all when Giles died. I know."

"Well," said Dave, very matter-of-fact, "it's perfectly obvious that Miss Alicia Hawksworth must not go back to England—ever again."

"I don't want to think about it," Claire said.

"But you must, my darling. It's the only way. After all, she's

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eighty-five. Nobody will be surprised. The only questions are—how and when?"

"We don't want to get the hotel a bad reputation," said Claire.

"Exactly. Which rules out poison or a boating accident. If only she were a bit frailer, to make it more believable . . ." Dave was pacing up and down the small office. "She's so damn fit. All this swimming and—" He stopped abruptly. "Swimming. That's it. Anybody who goes swimming before breakfast at her age, ignores the signs, and goes beyond the reef—"

Claire said, "She's already made a lot of friends among the guests here. They know she really only goes paddling. Best leave it until—let me see—" She consulted the wall chart which showed dates of bookings. "Sunday morning, two weeks from now. All the people she knows will be leaving by Saturday, and a new lot arriving on Sunday. But how—?"

"You've still got those pills, haven't you? The ones the doctor gave you to help you sleep after Giles died?"

"Yes." Claire's voice was a whisper.

"Half a dozen should do it. Give me the pills and the letters—which I'll burn. Leave it to me."

So Claire—who had always been a practical girl—handed over the sleeping pills and the letters and left it to Dave. In fact, after two weeks she had almost—but not quite—forgotten that Aunt Alicia was to be drowned on Sunday morning.

It was almost unbelievably simple. Dave, who frequently acted as barman, administered the pills to Aunt Alicia in a final bedtime drink concocted with so many aromatic West Indian spices that any bitter taste was completely masked. When he got to the cottage at five a.m.—how clever Giles had been to insure absolute privacy for every unit—Aunt Alicia was in a deep sleep.

It was unpleasant but not difficult to remove her nightdress and get her into a swimsuit. Light as a leaf, he carried her to the water, and swam with her past the notice which said: *SWIMMERS. DANGER. DO NOT GO BEYOND THIS POINT.* In other words, beyond the protective reef.

Then he held her under for long enough. More than long enough. Afterward he went back to his cottage for another hour's sleep.

It was one of the breakfast waitresses who first remarked that Aunt Alicia was missing. "Miss Hawksworth not having breakfast today?" she asked Dave, who was always up and about early.

"Doesn't seem like it. Having a lie-in for once," he replied.

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At nine o'clock, as usual, Claire appeared. In front of several of the staff and guests Dave said to her, "Your aunt seems to be sleeping late. Nobody's seen her."

Claire's brow wrinkled. "That's funny," she said. "She never misses her morning swim. Maybe I'd better go down to the cottage and see."

Three minutes later she was back. "I can't understand it. Her nightdress is on the bed, but she's not there. I've told her and told her not to go swimming too far out in the early morning, when there's nobody else on the beach . . ."

Very soon it was all over the hotel. Poor Mrs. Hawksworth. This old aunt of hers, eighty-five, mind you, insisted on going for an early swim and just hasn't come back . . . what a terrible thing . . .

The police were called, and the Coast Guard. The body was found the next day, washed up by the tide on Great Seal Island, just across the strait. Coroner's inquest. Accidental death by drowning. Body by then unsuitable for shipping home. A dignified burial at sea. Announcement in the London *Times*. Telegrams to Patrick and Sheila and Mrs. Bradley.

Claire and Dave decided to do strictly nothing about making contact with Mr. Bridgenorth. Mustn't seem greedy. Wills take some time to be probated in England, nothing to worry about, the news will come sooner or later.

After a couple of weeks letters of condolence began to arrive from England. One of the first was from Mrs. Bradley, the housekeeper.

"Dear Mrs. Hawksworth,

Oh, what a shock your telegram gave me. Poor Miss Alicia—but then, she was getting on in years, had to be expected I suppose. I am keeping the cats, which are in the pink and eating well, as you'll be glad to hear. One last thing I was able to do for poor Miss Alicia. Just a few days before she died I got a letter from her written from your hotel. Well, that's in a manner of speaking, because when I opened it I found she had put it in the wrong envelope and it was really for Mr. Bridgenorth, who I know well, being Miss Alicia's solicitor. Something about her will, I think, though of course I didn't read it. I called him right away, but funnily enough he never received the letter she must have meant for me. Anyhow, I forwarded the letter to him right away, so trust that all is in order.

With much sympathy on your sad loss.

Yours faithfully, M. Bradley."

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a ***NEW*** **Photographer story by**

JAMES HOLDING

CHALLENGE TO THE AUTHOR: *A plot idea for the next Photographer story: when Manuel Andradas, the Nullifier, looks at the name and address on the slip of paper handed to him by Rodolfo, he reads his own name and address. He has been given the assignment to nullify himself! How does the Photographer give positive proof to the Big Ones (no trick photo) of his own death, collect his murderer's fee, and still remain alive to tell the tale?*

THE PHOTOGRAPHER AND THE LETTER

by JAMES HOLDING

Gray curtains of rain swept gustily across the city. Low-hanging clouds obscured Corcovado and Sugar Loaf. The mosaic sidewalks were being scoured clean by running freshets. And the late January storm showed no signs of abating as Manuel Andradas, the Photographer, pushing back the hood of his streaming slicker, left the muddy path and ducked under the tin canopy of a jerry-built café in Chicken Hill.

Inside the café, Rodolfo, seated at a rickety orange-crate table and sipping *cafezinho,* was awaiting him, the sole occupant of the bar save for the proprietor at the rear of the room.

Manuel shrugged off the shoulder strap of his camera case and opened the case to make sure no raindrops had penetrated it to damage his cameras. Then, satisfied, he took a seat across from Rodolfo, placing his camera case protectively between his feet.

"Photographer," Rodolfo greeted him, "you managed to get here after all."

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"When have I failed you?"

"You must need money very badly," Rodolfo said with a smug lifting of his long lips.

"To come out in a January storm, to a filthy café, in a stinking slum? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"They are nothing to me," said Manuel with the air of a man immune to circumstance, "when I am called out to do a service for the Corporation." He lifted his eyes to Rodolfo's. "I suspect this is such an occasion, is it not?"

"It is. Out of recognition for your sterling services to them in the past, the Big Ones are calling on you once again."

The Photographer regarded Rodolfo narrowly. Such flattery was not usual with him. "Oh?" he said. "They have begun to appreciate me at last, have they?"

"They have always appreciated you. It is your everlasting demands for more money that they do not appreciate."

"Tut, tut," said Manuel. "Have you not heard of inflation, Rodolfo? It plagues us all, whether an august member of the Corporation, a humble photographer, or merely"—he slanted a contemptuous look at Rodolfo—"an errand boy for the Big Ones."

Rodolfo put down his coffee cup with a deliberate clatter. "Can't we discuss this without insults, please?" He advanced his prognathous jaw belligerently. "Or would you prefer to retire on your laurels, perhaps, and confine your future activities to photography only?"

Manuel enjoyed baiting Rodolfo; yet, since he was Manuel's only contact in Rio de Janeiro with the Big Ones, he apologized sourly—an apology both men knew to be utterly insincere. "Tell me about the assignment," the Photographer said.

Rodolfo took a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it across the orange crate to Manuel. The Photographer closed it in his fist and called loudly for the proprietor to bring him a *cafezinho*. Only when the miniature cup of inky coffee was on the table before him and the proprietor had withdrawn beyond earshot did Manuel read the name and address on the slip of paper.

He raised his head and looked at Rodolfo. "It is a woman," he said without inflection. "I have told you it offends me to nullify women."

"I remember. Yet, though offended, you have never failed to carry out such assignments, is that not so?"

Manuel said nothing. The handwritten name on the slip of paper

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was Derma Paiola. The address below the name was that of a popular nightclub.

"This is an important assignment for you," Rodolfo said softly. "One you cannot afford to reject. I have never known the Big Ones so edgy about an assignment."

Manuel brightened. "Ah," he said with satisfaction, "of course, if the price is generous enough, I may be able to overcome my scruples. The Big Ones are nervous, eh? Then your client must be very important, Rodolfo."

"Yes. Very."

"And exceptionally anxious to have this one out of the way?" He flicked the slip of paper with a fingernail.

"Obviously."

"I wonder what she's done to become so important to your client."

"We know what she's done," said Rodolfo.

Manuel raised his eyebrows. "You know?" He was surprised. The Big Ones seldom confided anything more than a name and an address for Rodolfo to pass along to Manuel.

Rodolfo nodded complacently, keeping the Photographer in suspense, perhaps in payment for his recent insult. At length he said, "She is a great courtesan, that one there."

"So? Since when is that an offense punishable by death?"

"She has written a book," replied Rodolfo quietly. "The story of her life."

Manuel chuckled. "What possesses these ladies to write a book about their lives? To offer the public a feast of scandal?"

"Whatever it is," Rodolfo answered, "it has put the fear of God into our client." His smoky eyes glinted with a spark of something that could have been amusement.

Manuel said crisply, "I accept the assignment. I do not approve of people who make a fortune by bespattering others with dirt. It is not moral."

The rain drummed loudly on the tin roof of the café. Rodolfo laughed. "It is a pleasure to hear you discuss morality, Photographer. You, of all people!"

Manuel put on his dignified manner. "I am speaking more of ethics, perhaps, than morals," he explained loftily. "In any event, let us settle the details of my assignment, if you please."

"By details, you mean, I suppose, the price the Big Ones will pay you for this nullification?"

"Exactly," said Manuel. "How much?"

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"Nothing," said Rodolfo. His smile became a smirk.

"Nothing?" The Photographer was shocked. "Are you joking?"

Rodolfo shook his head. "Not at all."

"I do not work for nothing. As you well know."

"You will this time."

"I tell you I will not. Why in God's name should I?"

"Because," said Rodolfo, "*you* are in the woman's book, Photographer."

There was a moment of astonished silence before Manuel said, "I have never been—ah, entertained—by this woman."

"Perhaps you have forgotten. Or knew her under another name. She has used many during her career as a nightclub singer."

Manuel was stubborn. "No. It is impossible. Anyway, how can you know that I am mentioned in her book?"

"Our client has seen the manuscript. In fact, he has stolen it from her. And on page 212 there you are as big as life: 'Manuel Andradas, the well-known news and fashion photographer on the staff of *Rio Illustrated,* is rumored to have a second but secret talent which he places, upon occasion, at the disposal of a certain criminal brotherhood in Rio. In which connection, the Rio police are advised to investigate more carefully the recent deaths of this one and that one and so on.' " Rodolfo made a dismissing gesture.

"Names? She names names in her book? Of people I have nullified for you?"

"Yes. And the right names, moreover. In all probability, she has no actual *proof* you committed the murders—"

"There *is* no proof!"

"So you could sue her for libel, I suppose. Yet you must realize that such an allegation would bring in the *polica* at once—and quite probably end in your utter ruin. And ours as well."

Manuel, under the orange crate, clasped his hands together with such force that the overdeveloped muscles in his forearms threatened to split the seams of his jacket sleeves. He said flatly, "I don't believe you, Rodolfo."

"We didn't think you would," said Rodolfo softly, "so our client has permitted us to make a copy of page 212 of the lady's manuscript to convince you."

He drew a Xeroxed copy of a typewritten page from his inner pocket and unfolded it. Manuel snatched it from him. "If your client has stolen the manuscript, how can this woman get the book published?"

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"She'll write it all down again," explained Rodolfo as though to a backward child, "and get it published easily, you may be sure. Unless you prevent it."

The words Rodolfo had quoted were there—a short paragraph at the bottom of the page. The paragraph ended with the names of three of Manuel's victims. The Photographer recalled clearly how many cruzeiros the Corporation had paid him to nullify each one. The upper part of the page seemed to be a carryover from the preceding page dealing with an erstwhile partner of Senhora Derma Paiola's who had apparently insisted that Derma wear a clown's makeup during their tender interludes.

Manuel said slowly, "We have been betrayed, Rodolfo. Both of us. One of the Big Ones has betrayed us. Only thus could this woman have learned these names."

Rodolfo shrugged. "Yes. Or perhaps you talk in your sleep."

"I repeat. I have never been intimate with this woman." He paused and slanted a muddy look at Rodolfo. "But it is obvious that one of the Big Ones *has*. And perhaps has talked in *his* sleep."

Rodolfo stood up. "Think what you like. But kindly realize that whoever is responsible for the betrayal, *all* the members of the Corporation will suffer if the book is published. Therefore they wish fast action. And therefore they call upon you to accommodate them. Since you are as much endangered as they."

Manuel gulped down the dregs of his coffee. "Understood."

"And I need not remind you that this time, above all others, we shall want positive proof that you have completed the assignment successfully."

"You shall have it," said Manuel grimly.

The Photographer was many things but he was not a fool.

He did not give his right name when he telephoned Derma Paiola that night for an appointment. He merely represented himself as calling for *Rio Illustrated*. Would she consent to be interviewed, he asked her, by a *Rio Illustrated* reporter for an article they planned on Rio's nightclub artists? It would be good publicity for her and for Club Papagayu where she was employed, he suggested. And she graciously agreed to talk with a reporter at her home the following afternoon.

Her home turned out to be a four-room suite, very chic and quite small, on the sixth floor of a towering apartment building on Av-

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enida Atlantico overlooking Copacabana Beach and the smiling waters of Guanabara Bay.

At Manuel's ring she herself opened the door to him. She was petite, pretty and animated, dressed casually in blouse and orange slacks that did nothing to hide her eye-catching figure. "From *Rio Illustrated?*" she inquired, with the lilt of a singer in her voice.

"Yes," said Manuel. "May I come in, Senhora?"

"Please." She stepped back and he entered. She motioned him to a seat in a silk brocade chair across from a matching sofa. She curled herself comfortably, after kicking off her shoes, on the sofa facing him. "So," she said pleasantly, "you are doing an article on nightclub performers?"

"I was not entirely honest with you there, Senhora." Manuel gave her a level look. "What we would really like to do is an article built exclusively around *you* and your—ah—exciting life style."

She stared at him. "There will be no article, then, I fear. I am a very ordinary, uninteresting singer who happens to work in a nightclub. My voice is not remarkable, my act is rather dull, and my private life is nobody's business but my own."

"Ah," said Manuel softly, "but what about your book, Senhora?"

"My book?"

"Yes. We have heard that you are writing a book about your life as a nightclub performer. An autobiography, Senhora? With—forgive me—some juicy items dealing with various of your—friends."

Derma Paiola laughed, a tinkling waterfall of sound. "Someone has misled you," she said. "I am not writing a book. Nor do I intend to. Where did you hear this nonsense?"

"A rumor only," said Manuel quickly. "You know the kind of gossip that circulates in your business? It is the same in mine."

"Well, this rumor happens to be a false one," said Derma Paiola shortly.

Manuel was politely insistent. "Are you quite sure, Senhora? I have your solemn word?"

"You have my solemn word." She shrugged her shapely shoulders and cast him a look that was half pique and half disappointment. "Here I was hoping to reap some free publicity for myself and Club Papagayu in your respected magazine. Instead, I get impertinent inquiries about a book I am supposed to be writing! There is no book, I repeat. So if that is all you wish to discuss with me, I bid you good day, Senhor—?" She waited for Manuel to supply his name.

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"Andradas," Manuel said quietly. This was the acid test. "Manuel Andradas, Senhora."

Her petulant expression did not change. To Manuel's watchful eyes, she betrayed no sign of recognition as he pronounced his name. He could detect no trace of the alarm and—yes, panic—that must surely have invaded her eyes if she found herself suddenly facing a man she knew to be a callous murderer.

Manuel frowned. "I am extremely sorry to have disturbed you over what seems to be but an unfounded rumor, Senhora." He made to rise from his chair. "*Rio Illustrated* apologizes for wasting your time."

She held up a hand. "Wait, Senhor Andradas. I am intrigued despite myself. As a journalist, perhaps you can hazard a guess as to who, in heaven's name, would be likely to start such a rumor about me? And why?"

"Who?" Manuel shrugged. "It's anybody's guess. And why?" He shrugged again. For a moment he was silent, holding her eyes. Then he said thoughtfully, "Perhaps the rumor was started by somebody who wants to get you killed."

"Killed!" She sat up straight abruptly. "Get me killed? Are you mad?"

He wagged his head slowly. "Just thinking aloud, Senhora."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Deliberately Manuel said, "Suppose you *were* writing this book about your career and your many—*perdao*—love affairs. To be mentioned in such a book might prove very embarrassing to some of your friends, eh? So embarrassing, in fact, that perhaps one of them might prefer to see you dead rather than have you place his secrets on public view?"

She stared at him as though he had taken leave of his senses. "Secrets? What secrets? I'm a simple nightclub singer, not a spy! I do not kiss and tell!"

"No doubt," Manual soothed her. "But is it not true that many things are said in pillow talk that are later regretted?"

She laughed. "Nothing that any of my friends, as you call them, would want to kill me for! And thereby risk a lifetime in prison!"

"Actually," said Manuel, "one doesn't need to risk a lifetime in prison. One can *hire* a murderer, you know. A professional. I assure that this is a fact."

Derma Paiola was beginning to look interested if not worried. "I can't believe anyone would want me killed."

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"Nevertheless, it is a possibility worth exploring, don't you agree? There must be *some* reason for this gossip about a non-existent book you are writing."

"I suppose so." Derma leaned forward, placed her elbows on her knees, and assumed a serious expression. "So, I shall play this guessing game with you a little longer." She dimpled at him. "I started it, after all."

"Va bem," said Manuel. "Let me think a moment. The rumor about your book surfaced at *Rio Illustrated* only two days ago. So if you have learned anything, or been the recipient of indiscreet confidences, worth being killed for"—he gave her an encouraging smile—"it must have been fairly recently. Agreed?"

"That seems logical. But where does it lead us?"

"It narrows down our suspects, that is all. May I ask you, Senhora, with respect and without offense, who is your current cavalier?"

Derma hesitated. Then, reluctantly, she said, "A man I met at the club's New Year's Eve party—an insecure, pathetically ugly fellow who tried so hard to impress me with his importance that I took pity on him." She paused, then added matter-of-factly, "And besides, he seemed to have plenty of money."

"Ugly?" asked Manuel, scenting at last the aroma he had hoped for, the sweet scent of cruzeiros. "How ugly?"

She giggled. "Like a monkey, that's how ugly! He looks like a monkey and walks like a monkey. But a *big* monkey, you understand, sort of attractive in a funny way, you know? He has some of the endearing tricks of a monkey, too."

"Ah," said Manuel quietly, "and does he have a name, this monkey of yours?"

She shook her head vehemently. "I have already told you that I am not one to kiss and tell."

"No matter. I think I know who he is. There is only one man in Rio who fits your description, so far as I know. I have run into him several times in digging out crime stories for my magazine. He is reputed to be connected with the Big Ones."

Suddenly it was no longer a game for Senhora Derma Paiola. Her eyes rounded with apprehension. When she spoke, she almost whispered. "What is *your* monkey's name, Senhor Andradas?"

"Rodolfo."

She gasped. "Mine, too," she said.

Manuel sucked in his breath. "He is a dangerous man, Senhora." He paused. "Your life may well be at risk. So I shall be indelicate

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and ask you this: Will you tell me all you can remember about your liaison with this Rodolfo?"

That evening Manuel faced Rodolfo again in another malodorous café, this one lapped about by the rabbit-warren slum known as Kerosene Hill. They were perfectly private: before Manuel's arrival Rodolfo had ordered two beers and sent the proprietor away.

Drinking directly from the bottle, Manuel sampled his beer.

Rodolfo said, "Well? Is it done?"

Manuel shook his head ruefully. "No."

"Then why did you request this meeting?"

"Complications have arisen, Rodolfo."

"What complications?"

"They were such as to make me think it wiser to postpone the matter until I checked with you again."

"What *were* the complications?"

"Principally a discovery I made, an unexpected discovery."

"For God's sake!" Rodolfo almost shouted. "What discovery did you make?"

"That Derma Paiola has *not* written a book, as your superiors told us. She has only written a letter."

"No book?" Rodolfo took a swig of his beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Rubbish! The Big Ones gave me a page of her manuscript for you!"

"True. But it seems she did not write it."

"Then who, in your opinion, did write it?"

"Your client, obviously."

"Our client?" Rodolfo looked bewildered.

"Yes. As a clever means of convincing you, and through you, me, that this lady should be nullified at once."

"Wait. If our client in this affair is a member of the Corporation, as we assumed, why should he go to the trouble . . .?"

Manuel shrugged. "Who knows? Perhaps he is an unimportant underling in the Big Ones' machine who invented the book to make the matter seem urgent."

Rodolfo was silent, his face expressionless. Manuel waited for him to ask the important question. At length Rodolfo said, "Just how did you discover that there is no book?"

"And that there *is* a letter?"

"Yes!" Rodolfo was definitely losing patience.

"I discovered it just when it began to seem as though this would

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be one of my easier assignments—as it should have been, you will admit, since I was not being paid for it."

His complaint was ignored by Rodolfo. "Go on, what happened?"

"I made an appointment with her to interview her for *Rio Illustrated*—"

"You didn't tell her your name, I hope."

"Of course not. I went to her home at the appointed hour this afternoon," Manuel went on crisply. "She let me into her apartment. I closed and locked her door behind me before following her as she walked ahead of me toward a sofa. I had stiffened my hand for the fatal blow to her nape, Rodolfo—it was that close!—when she suddenly faced me and said, 'You've come to kill me, haven't you?"

Rodolfo pursed his lips in a grimace that made him look more monkey-like than usual. Manuel went on, "She looked at my camera case, and said, 'You must be Manuel Andradas, the Photographer. I have been expecting you.' "

This time Rodolfo expressed his emotions by raising his eyebrows.

With a faintly defensive air Manuel said, "You know me, Rodolfo. Not for a single moment would I have allowed this unexpected statement of hers to delay her execution."

"Yet obviously, you did."

"What made me pause," Manuel explained, "was what she said next."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'I'm glad you have come, Senhor Andradas.' Just like that. 'I'm glad you have come.' Glad! I thought that an odd word for a woman to use who was about to be murdered."

"Extraordinary!" said Rodolfo, more intent now. "And—?"

"So, in spite of myself and against all my own rules, I found myself saying to her, 'You are a young and beautiful woman, Senhora, thus to welcome death.' "

"You sentimental fool! What did she reply?"

"That she had no intention of dying just yet. Which made me smile, of course, since I was standing there within arm's reach of her." Manuel chuckled.

Rodolfo said with irritation, "You can contemplate your prowess as a killer later. Go on."

"Well, the reason she was glad I'd come, she told me, was because I could carry a message to those who sent me to kill her."

"Don't be dramatic. What is the message?" Rodolfo began to tap one foot nervously on the mud floor of the café.

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Manuel screwed up his face in the effort of memory. "She made me learn it by heart: 'Tell those who sent you that if I should unexpectedly turn up dead, even from natural-seeming causes, the Big Ones will immediately find themselves in deeper trouble than even they can handle.' Those were her words, Rodolfo. Do you understand what she meant?" The Photographer was enjoying himself.

"No." Rodolfo nibbled on his lower lip with stained teeth.

"Nor I, at first. I thought, naturally, that she was referring to the publication of the book she had written. I said, 'Have you arranged to have your book published posthumously, Senhora?' "

" 'Book?' she said. 'What book? I haven't written a book. Are you mad? I have, however, written a letter. A letter which is more than able to avenge me if anything untoward happens to me.' "

"And you believed this nonsense?"

"Not entirely, no. Not until she told me a bit more about this letter of hers. Then I began to think I'd better check with you and the Corporation before I went any further with my job."

"What did she tell you about the letter?"

"Two things. First, that after writing it, she had left it in the hands of a reputable attorney, whose name she would not divulge, with instructions to release it immediately to the Brazilian press in case of her sudden death from any cause whatever. And second, she sketched for me the letter's contents, and how she came by them."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It seems she recently took as a lover a man who, while drunk one night, revealed to her certain damning facts about the Big Ones in an effort to impress her with his own importance."

"So! A lover!" Rodolfo moistened his lips with a sip of beer. "Did she tell you this lover's name?"

"No. I tried to persuade her to, but she refused on the curious grounds that she had never been one to kiss and tell, as she put it, and didn't intend to start now."

Rodolfo visibly relaxed. Manuel added maliciously, ". . . unless, of course, her lover had her murdered, in which case her letter will tell all."

"Why," asked Rodolfo, "should she think her lover would have her killed?" He had begun to sweat.

"What else *could* she think? She realized at once that in confiding such secret information to her about the Big Ones, her lover had simultaneously passed a death sentence on her. She is not a stupid woman, Rodolfo."

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Struggling to sound matter-of-fact, Rodolfo said, "Did she offer you any samples of her lover's revelations?"

"Not specifically—except about me being an assassin for the Corporation."

Rudolfo breathed more easily. "Is that all?"

"Not quite." Manuel savored his moment. "Her letter also contains, she told me, the names of a number of the Big Ones in the Rio hierarchy—from her lover's name and your humble servant's all the way to those of the top executives of the Corporation."

It seemed to Manuel that Rodolfo's sallow skin blanched a little. "The actual names of Corporation members?"

"That's what she claimed. She could be lying of course. But if not, her letter could be worse for all of us than her non-existent book. Don't you agree?"

"It would be disastrous!" Rodolfo cleared his receding brow of perspiration with a soiled handkerchief, and muttered as though to himself, "And what would happen to her lover doesn't bear thinking on!" Yet Rodolfo was evidently doing just that. An involuntary shudder shook him briefly.

For a few uneasy moments both men were silent. At length Rodolfo murmured, "I must depend on you, Photographer, for a resolution of this puzzle. Did you believe the Senhora was telling the truth about her letter? Or is it all a tissue of lies to save her life?"

"I believed her about the letter."

"What convinced you?"

"She saw my skepticism, and finally became more specific about the damaging information in the letter."

Rodolfo went suddenly as still as the cockroach under his chair.

"She instructed me," said Manuel calmly, "to tell you one of the names in her letter. That her knowledge of it would prove beyond doubt she was telling the truth."

Rodolfo put a hand to his mouth. "What name?"

Manuel said, "Personally, I never heard it before. But she said the Big Ones would recognize it." Manuel regarded Rodolfo with solemn eyes. "It was Eduardo. Eduardo do Carmo."

Rodolfo went a sickly gray. His body seemed to collapse on itself.

"Is this Eduardo do Carmo one of the Big Ones, then?" asked Manuel innocently.

In a very small voice Rodolfo said, "Near enough. That damn woman is a threat to us all!"

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Manuel leaned back in his rickety chair. "I thought it might be so. That's why I decided to check with you before I nullified her."

"You were wise." Rodolfo spoke in such a soft voice that Manuel had to strain to catch his words. "On my own authority, Photographer, I direct you for the time being *not* to nullify Senhora Paiola. I repeat, *not*. Until I consult with my superiors. Is that clearly understood?"

Manuel nodded.

"Meet me at the café below the Christus on Corcovado tomorrow at eleven. I shall bring you the decision of the Corporation."

"Whether to nullify or not to nullify?"

"Yes."

"I can already tell you what that decision will be," said Manuel confidently.

"Yes?"

"To leave Senhora Paiola strictly alone for the foreseeable future."

Rodolfo said, "You are probably correct."

The Photographer smiled, a rare thing for him. "If so," he said with a false air of sycophancy, "perhaps you will recommend to the Big Ones that I be rewarded for my forbearance? That I be given something to signify their satisfaction that I have *not* nullified this woman as you instructed me to do, and have therefore saved them all from cruel embarrassment, if not utter ruin?"

Rodolfo's eyes were black pits of distilled hatred. "Perhaps so," he said in a strangled voice.

"Half a million cruzeiros would be appropriate, don't you think?" suggested Manuel blandly.

Rodolfo winced. "In my judgment, three hundred thousand would be more than generous," he said.

"Five hundred thousand." Manuel was firm. "It is a pittance for the service I have rendered. Considering inflation, of course."

"I shall do my best. They may not agree to such a sum."

"We can but hope." Manuel drank the last of his beer with relish. "If they prove recalcitrant, perhaps you should remind them of the wise words our own former emperor, Dom Pedro the Second, uttered on one occasion."

Rodolfo was already on his way to the door. He ignored Manuel's advice.

But to his retreating back Manuel said sententiously, "Even the proudest of men must occasionally bow his head."

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Plancke painted men at work in pioneer Wisconsin the way Grandma Moses painted the farm life of nineteenth-century New England . . .

AMERICAN PRIMITIVE

by RITA RITCHIE

"You would get much more money by putting these up at auction, Mr. De Notte." Mrs. Arbuthmore gestured gracefully at the canvases propped up against the furniture of her elegant drawing room. "And yet you are offering to sell them to me—four Walter Planckes, worth thousands!"

De Notte smiled with some embarrassment. "I realize this is somewhat unusual, approaching you this way, Mrs. Arbuthmore. But I've had some misfortune in the stock market and I need immediate cash to cover my losses. By selling privately, the price of these paintings won't have to include a gallery's commission."

"But how did you come by my name?" Her voice held a trace of suspicion.

"Mrs. Arbuthmore, it's well known that you have the largest collection of American primitive paintings outside museums and galleries. Particularly of Walter Planckes."

"My late husband encouraged my artistic interest. I discovered Walter Plancke, you know. He might have spent his entire career trading paintings for beer in backwoods taverns, except that a friend of his sent a few pieces to the Farthing Galleries in Milwaukee. I recognized his talent at once. Plancke painted recollections of men at work in pioneer Wisconsin the way Grandma Moses painted her own memories of farm life. One day his fame will equal hers, perhaps outstrip hers."

"You never met him?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Farthing told me enough about him to satisfy my curiosity. Plancke took up painting after he retired from logging. His artistic career lasted only eight years before he died of

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old age. Yet he produced an amazing amount of work—all of it untaught and instinctive, pure American primitive."

"Then if anyone should know Plancke's work, Mrs. Arbuthmore, you will see that these are genuine. Feel free to examine them thoroughly." De Notte strolled leisurely to the other end of the white-and-gold drawing room, admiring the antique vases, the Oriental rugs, the marble statuary. He was a young man, yet he fitted in well in this setting, with his expensive suit, his styled hair and mustache, his modulated voice and discreet gestures.

Mrs. Arbuthmore studied the paintings in the revealing daylight that flooded through the tall windows, light that reached her stately home from across Lake Geneva's sun-polished surface.

These four scenes were of lumbermen skidding out logs during winter, ice cutters working on a pond, men erecting a windmill, and workers building an earthen dam. They were painted in simple lines and primary colors, like old barn decorations or quilt patterns. But it was Plancke's peculiar brushstroke for which Mrs. Arbuthmore looked—a rightward swirl ending in a tiny twist. As Mr. Farthing had once pointed out to her, this kind of brushstroke was part of the artist's nervous system, not a result of practise, and it was impossible to imitate.

When De Notte joined her, Mrs. Arbuthmore nodded. "Yes, these are perfectly genuine Planckes. However, I have never bought anything directly. It has always been through a gallery so that I was certain everything was in order."

De Notte took some folded papers from his pocket. "Here is proof of my ownership. These are receipts for the paintings when I bought them from Walter Plancke."

Mrs. Arbuthmore could not hide her astonishment. "You bought these paintings directly from the artist himself? But the Farthing Galleries has always had exclusive rights to handle his work! Plancke was not to sell on his own."

"This was long before the Farthing Galleries ever heard of Walter Plancke," De Notte explained. "I was an art student at the time, working summers in the northern resort areas. A bartender told me about Plancke, and I went to visit his studio."

Mrs. Arbuthmore objected. "Walter Plancke was a recluse."

"But not a hermit," De Notte countered. "I went with a friend. During our visit I realized that Plancke's work would be of considerable value some day. I bought these four paintings and Plancke wrote out these receipts for me." He handed them to her. "That was

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about ten years ago. In the three years since his death Plancke's work has increased greatly in value, as I'm sure you realize."

"Museums are buying him now, when they can find any for sale. They began outbidding me as soon as Plancke's work received attention from the most important art critics." She studied the receipts. They were four pages torn out of an ordinary blue-lined notebook, and scribbled on each in pencil were the date, the amount, and one or two words in description, like "windmill," or "cutting ice."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Plancke's early work went to local tradesmen in exchange for necessities. Later his paintings were sent to Mr. Farthing, who saw Plancke only once when he went up to buy whatever canvases were still hanging in the groceries and taverns. Mr. De Notte, you must be the only person who ever bought directly from Plancke in his studio. Were you able to see him at work?"

"Yes, and it was a privilege to watch him painting while we were there. Even though untrained, he handled his brush skillfully."

Mrs. Arbuthmore seemed impressed. "You actually saw him painting with his own hands?"

"With his very own hands," he assured her.

She gestured with the receipts. "Walter Plancke never titled his paintings, nor kept track of what went to the gallery. Farthing's had to write out long descriptions in order to identify each painting of his they handled."

"Mrs. Arbuthmore, if you are uneasy about my ownership, please call this number in Milwaukee." He handed her a business card.

She read it aloud. "Roderick Alben. Trueline Graphics."

"That's the friend who went with me to see Plancke. He's now a commercial photographer."

Excusing herself, Mrs. Arbuthmore went to the study across the hall from the drawing room and dialed the long-distance number. Roderick Alben himself answered. She explained the purpose of her call.

Alben recalled that long-ago visit to the backwoods artist. "He kept right on painting while we were there. John De Notte bought four of his pictures, but I didn't have any spare cash at the time."

Mrs. Arbuthmore was consoling. "At least you got to shake the hand of a genuine American primitive painter."

"That's true," Alben agreed. "Of course, that means more now than it did at the time."

She thanked him and returned to her visitor. "Everything seems

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to be in order. What are you asking for these paintings?"

The agreement, involving thousands of dollars, was soon reached. De Notte specified cash. "Can you get it today?"

"My banker is an old friend. He'll send it over at once."

Mrs. Arbuthmore left the room, ordered her maid to bring coffee, and entered the study to make another telephone call. She rejoined her guest as the maid was setting down the coffee tray. "Mr. De Notte, we have only twenty minutes or so to wait for the money. Cream or sugar?"

They chatted until the doorbell rang and the maid brought three men into the room. Two wore policemen's uniforms. The one in plainclothes strode briskly toward De Notte and said firmly, "Nick Owens, I arrest you on suspicion of theft of four valuable paintings from a private residence in Milwaukee." As the detective read him his rights, De Notte sprang up, but the officers seized him.

"There's some mistake," De Notte sputtered. "Mrs. Arbuthmore!"

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Lieutenant," she said.

The lieutenant explained. "Mrs. Arbuthmore became suspicious of you and called the police when you thought she was phoning her banker. We confirmed that these paintings were stolen after an art class had viewed a private collection. Her description of you matched that of Nick Owens, the student who vanished at the time of the theft. And right about now your roommate Roderick Alben is being picked up as an accessory."

Owens gazed sullenly at Mrs. Arbuthmore. "I thought you believed my story. And those receipts I made looked like something from an old backwoodsman."

"Few knew of Walter Plancke's condition," she answered. "Mr. Farthing only found out on his single visit to him. When he told me, I suggested we keep quiet about it to prevent people buying his paintings out of pity. We wanted Plancke's work to achieve recognition on its artistic merit, as indeed it has."

"Condition?" What are you talking about?" Owens demanded.

Mrs. Arbuthmore smiled. "Walter Plancke lost the use of both his arms in a logging accident. This happened before he began to paint. He taught himself to paint by gripping the brush with his toes. That accounts for his unique brushstroke. And that's how I knew you lied about how you obtained the paintings. I doubt he could have written those receipts. I knew that he did not shake hands with your accomplice. And you certainly never saw him painting, Mr. Owens. At least not painting with his hands!"

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THE THEFT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

by MAE Z. SCANLAN

A tale I have to tell you, if you've got a bit of time,
Of a most uncommon criminal, and a most uncommon crime.
It happened at a small prestigious college in the East,
Where the students all wore neckties, and their pants were sharply creased.
The criminal was twenty—Arthur Nolan was his name—
And he had a straight A average in astronomy. They claim
That he *could* have been the finest astrophysicist of all
Had he not become a criminal (so bounceth Fortune's ball).
His albatross was English. He excelled with astral charts,
But he simply couldn't handle nouns or verbs or sentence parts.
He could rattle off the data on the farthest constellation,
But he climbed the ivied walls when faced with simple punctuation.
He could tell you all there is to know of Halley and his comet,
But to think of prepositions, or of gerunds, made him vomit.
Though a question on infinitives could put him in a coma,
He *had* to pass his English. If he didn't, no diploma.
His professor was a scholar, stern and stalwart in his jacket,
And he didn't have much sympathy for those who couldn't hack it.
He was tough and he was learned, and his name was Astor Krall,
And he loved the English language more than anything at all.
So, though Arthur begged for mercy, the professor acted deaf,
And in English Composition Arthur Nolan got an F.
Well, his rosy cozy future as a scientific whiz
Was demolished on a grade sheet. Arthur Nolan was a fizz.
As his buddies got their sheepskins on a sparkling day in May,
Arthur Nolan made his mind up: his professor'd have to pay.
So a canny cunning plot was hatched—a curious stripe of sin,
A diabolic scheme to do the English language in.

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He riffled through his closet for a certain kind of sack,
Which he found beneath a broken blue umbrella in the back.
He bought himself a stocking mask, and sneakers soft of sole,
He waited for a moonless night, then took a quiet stroll
Beside the dormitories and across the college quad,
And he ambled nonchalantly, so that none would think him odd.
He scrabbled in the bushes till he came to Dryden Hall,
Wherein were housed the greatest English textbooks of them all.
He cast his eyes from right to left, and then from left to right,
But not a soul was stirring on this chilly moonless night.
He sidled up the steps, and with an enviable knack
He jimmied several locks, and quickly entered with his sack.
And then, that night in April, a horrendous crime occurred,
As Arthur launched his mass attack upon the printed word.
He grabbed a pronoun and a verb, and then, with no compunction,
He threw them in his sack, along with nouns and one conjunction.
His hand shot out and closed around a random interjection.
Whee! thought Arthur. What a gem to add to my collection!
He scooped up every adjective and consonant in sight
And slid them in his satchel in the darkness of the night.
He spied a lone apostrophe and captured it with glee,
Plus a pair of bent parentheses, which fell against his knee.
He groped around haphazardly. Eureka! Arthur Nolan
Was quick to whisper to himself: My nemesis, the colon!
He climbed a chair and patted shelves as high as he could reach,
Disturbing vowels and question marks, and several parts of speech.
He heard a noise, and started, for the fellow's nerves were jangling,
He found its source and saw it was a participle dangling.
"I gotcha!" muttered Arthur, as he stuffed it in his pouch
With a vengeance so intense he almost heard the word yell, "Ouch!"
You'd not believe the beating that the English language took
From this one disgruntled student, from this one adroit crook.
He enjoyed its foul destruction, and attacked it with abandon,
Stealing every punctuation mark that he could get his hand on.

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The deed was finally finished, and from Dryden Hall he fled,
Leaving sentences in shambles, and the language left for dead.
He sneaked around the hedges, pleased as poppies with his take,
Giving not one thought to all the devastation in his wake.
Well, the crime was soon discovered, and the atmosphere grew hectic,
The dean was in a rage, Professor Krall was apoplectic.
For Arthur Nolan had indeed created a sensation.
You see, he stole the whole of written-language punctuation.
The law-enforcement officers arrived at ten, in herds,
And poor Professor Krall for once was at a loss for words.
The campus was abuzz with all the talk about the thief
Who'd baffled the detectives and who'd mystified the chief.
The city's top reporters came to write about the drama
Of the man who purloined predicates, the thief who stole a comma.
In time they tracked old Arthur down—he'd left a trail of dashes—
His hopes for astral accolades reduced to simple ashes.
His booty was recovered where he'd tossed it days before,
In a dented plastic trashcan just behind a hardware store.
The adjectives and periods were hopelessly confused,
The pronoun antecedents had been miserably abused.
The phrases and the clauses were in such a sorry jumble,
Professor Krall gave forth a groan, a grimace, and a grumble.
He murmured, and 'twas noticed that his lips and fingers trembled,
"I haven't time to see the English language reassembled.
And so I quit! I've had enough of groves of academe,
To put things back together must be someone else's dream."
He grabbed his pipe and bicycle and, frowning, off he went,
Quoting fragments of *The Taming of the Shrew* as was his bent.
Now if you're an English teacher, or an out-of-work grammarian,
A poet or philosopher, or unemployed librarian,
I beg you, give a call to see if you can help, at least—
They could use you at a small prestigious college in the East.
Nolan was found guilty of the charges that were pressed,
And 'twas hoped he'd wear a number, as the nearby prison's guest.
The judge, though, couldn't sentence him, because, alas, you see,
All sentences had been destroyed, so Art got off scot-free.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 589th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . If this story doesn't make you hungry, no story ever will . . .

The author, Marge Blaine, is in her early forties. She is married—her husband is Chairman of the English Department at a Manhattan high school—and they have two children aged eleven and fourteen. Mrs. Blaine was a kindergarten teacher, but for the last seven or eight years she has done freelance writing—articles and reviews, and two children's books. Her articles included, you won't be surprised to learn, a series of restaurant reviews—which led to this story, her first fiction for adults. Recently she has become "involved in Chinese cooking" . . .

MY COMPLIMENTS TO THE CHEF

by MARGE BLAINE

I was a cook. A *chef extraordinaire*. One of those people who knows which comes first, the chicken or the egg. It's the chicken, of course. You save the eggs for dessert—in a soufflé perhaps.

Who would have thought, when I first opened my restaurant, that it would become so big a success? Or that it would lead to my becoming involved with the man in the black suit. Certainly not me! I'd never quite believed that people like Big Charlie even existed.

Cooking's been my passion for years. There are pictures of me at five or six, my braids pinned to the top of my head, standing on a stool so I can reach the stove, stirring a *sauce bechamel*. While I was still in my teens I took over all the family parties—Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays—planning and preparing food for more than a dozen people. That's when I began creating my own reci-

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pes—flaky desserts, smooth sauces, unusual combinations of flavors and textures.

Then there were the courses at the Cordon Bleu in Paris where I was the youngest student ever accepted. And my stint as a *sous-chef* at the four-star Paris Nuit. (I could tell you unbelievable tales about what goes on in their kitchen, only that's another story.) Afterward I was offered my choice of positions in France—in Paris, on the Riviera, and in the old walled city of Carcassonne. But I'd been away from my own country too long. I wanted to come back, to see if I could make it on my own turf.

The trip home was triumphant. I had free passage on the QEII in exchange for a series of lecture-demonstrations on the Nouvelle Cuisine. The audiences—middle-aged, mostly women—oohed and aahed over my garnishes and took notes assiduously. The talks, including preparation, took no more than three or four hours a day. For the rest of the time I was free.

That's when I met Mike. He was on his way back to the States too, after two years in the Peace Corps in North Africa. You might say it was love at first sight. It was certainly something at first sight. And not just because each of us had been relatively isolated for several years. We spent every available minute together, Mike joining the cooking group even though he didn't know a Cuisinart from a boning knife. We shared a table for two for late breakfasts—and my first-class cabin. By the end of the voyage we knew we belonged together forever.

We had some adjusting to do once we got back—looking for an apartment, becoming reacquainted with our families, getting married. Mike went to work for the Welfare Department. He said it wasn't much different from being in Africa, only here his clients had television sets so they could see what they were missing!

It was harder for me to find a job than I'd expected, given my qualifications. Most kitchens were still male bastions. In one place they even offered to hire me as a waitress! Me, who'd prepared soufflés for Princess Grace. Finally I was taken on as Pastry Assistant at Les Moules.

But my goal was not to become Pastry Chef or even Head Chef at a place like Les Moules. No, it was to open my own restaurant. Small yet elegant. Where I could experiment with food, create new dishes, earn my living the way I most enjoyed.

Fortunately Mike shared my dream. We saved frantically that first year, putting everything we could into our "restaurant fund."

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In our free time we explored the city, getting a feeling for its neighborhoods and people. And we began scouting for a location—off the beaten track so the rent would be affordable. Yet accessible enough so we could build a clientele. We dogged realtors, followed newspaper ads, checked out any promising lead.

There was the "long-established neighborhood restaurant" which turned out to be a bar and grill. The fast-food joint that touted "modern structure, plenty of free parking." Another had wall-to-wall cockroaches.

Then we found it. In one of those neighborhoods euphemistically called "changing." We just hoped it was changing for the better, not worse. There were still plenty of tenements and some deserted stores in the area, but there was an art school a few blocks away. And professionals were buying the shabby yet well-built rooming-houses, turning them back into elegant townhouses.

Let me pass briefly over the hassles of trying to open—workmen who didn't show up when they promised, the supplier who "forgot" to deliver the stoves.

Still, I was buoyed along by the excitement. I searched out the best sources for produce, meat, and fresh fish. And I haunted the small neighborhood antique shops. The décor was going to be as distinctive as the menu.

Finally we installed the sign on top of our front window. *RESTAURANT ROCHELLE*, it read, in ornate gold lettering. I'd thought we should call it Restaurant Rosalinda or Café Claudine to give it a French air, only Mike wouldn't hear of it. He insisted it be named after the chef. Why hadn't my parents thought of how my name would look on a marquee before they called me Rochelle!

Mike took a leave of absence from the Welfare Department. With him as manager and me as cook we'd be able to manage with a part-time assistant and one waitress—we hoped. It was all we could afford, even if things went well. And if they didn't? I tried not to think about that.

We found that our clientele consisted of three main types—older people, students, and the professionals from the area. The older people complained most and complimented least. The students stuck to tight budgets but tended to be appreciative. The professional people, couples in their thirties for the most part, spent more freely than the others, and fortunately, patronized us more often.

That's why I noticed the man in the black suit as soon as he came

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in. It was just before we opened one evening and I was checking the tables as I always did, to make sure everything was in place.

He was a tall beefy man in his fifties, stylishly dressed, but with an odd look about him. Perhaps it was the hat. I thought he'd come to the wrong place. He stood alone, at the entrance to the dining room, smoking a cigar, oblivious of the sign: *THANK YOU FOR NOT SMOKING IN THE DINING ROOM.*

One of my decisions had been to ban smoking. I hate restaurants where drifting smoke spoils the food. We'd set up a lounge in the lobby where people could smoke or have a glass of wine. So far it had worked out extremely well.

"Excuse me, sir," I said, walking toward him. "Smoking's not permitted in the dining room."

He seemed not to have heard. "I want to see the owner," he demanded in a deep harsh voice. He had broad shoulders, accentuated by the cut of his suit.

"I'm sorry, but there's no smoking in here. We'll have to go to the lounge."

He shoved the cigar into a corner of his mouth and glared at me. "Listen, I said the owner."

"I'm the owner," I told him, trying to keep my voice pleasant. It doesn't do to alienate anyone in this line of work, potential customer or not. "Let's go into the lobby—or my office." I turned, hoping he'd follow. I didn't have many options if he didn't.

I sat down behind my desk and pushed an ashtray toward him, putting my hands in my lap so he wouldn't see that they were shaking.

"Yes. What do you want?" I asked.

"You really the owner?"

I nodded.

"Pleased to meet'cha." He grimaced in what was probably meant to be a smile. "I seen all the work going on. Want to wish you luck in the new place. You've been open what now, three-four weeks?"

"Four weeks on Sunday," I told him. "Do you live nearby?"

He stuck the cigar back into his mouth, puffed, and blew the smoke out, angling it slightly away from me, yet in my general direction. "Yeah, I live here. Lived here all my life. You mean no one's told you about Big Charlie?"

"No." I shook my head. The smell of the cigar was making me queasy. Or it might have been his flat unemotional tone. I didn't think any longer that his visit was a mistake.

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"Well, I'm Big Charlie." he said. "This is my area. I keep tabs on all the people—me and my boys. We lend a little money here and there. Watch the businesses on the street. Make sure no one breaks the windows or holds you up on your way to the bank at ten thirty at night."

I shivered. How did he know I made a deposit at ten thirty? He must have been following me. Or had one of his "boys" on my trail.

He smiled again. "So we've been watching your place, waiting to see how you'd make out. A nice young couple, starting a new venture. I like to see that happen. And I've heard the food here's pretty good. Unusual but good. I'll have to try it sometime."

"I hope you will," I told him, proud owner to the core.

"Now, we wouldn't want anything to happen," he said. "Broken window, broken arm, explosion in the kitchen, would we?"

"Of course not!"

"No. It would slow down business, just when you're getting started. Might even put you out of business if enough went wrong. That's what happened to the shoemaker over on Fifth Street."

I shivered again. Pictures of me with a broken arm or leg—or even with broken fingers—flashed through my mind. And what if they hurt Mike?

"So we'll keep an eye out," he told me. "I'll assign someone to you, special. Your windows stay good. No robberies. No trouble of any kind. Any trouble you bring it straight to me, Big Charlie. It's all part of the deal."

The smell of cigar smoke combined with what he was saying were making me feel dizzy. He was strongarming me, here in my own restaurant. Big Charlie wanted to protect me all right—protect me from him! That's all I needed, an extortionist for a partner; we could barely manage the way things were.

"Ummm. How much would this cost?" I asked timidly.

He leaned back in the chair. "Five hundred a month."

I gasped. "I can't pay that!"

"Of course you can. Maybe not right away. But once you get on your feet, sure. Listen, I'm not going to interfere with your business. I'll give you a couple of weeks—start collecting the end of next month. How's that?"

In another month we might be on our feet, sure, I thought. But the most we'd figured we could clear was one or two thousand a month. Five hundred would drain us. We'd never show a profit. I needed time to think, to decide what to do about Big Charlie's threat.

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I couldn't afford to make a mistake. But he sat there, making no move to leave.

Finally I got up. "I have to get back to the kitchen now—my helper can't handle it alone. Are you staying for dinner?"

He stood too, taking another puff of his cigar. "Maybe I will. See if the food's as good as they say."

"Leave the cigar here, please," I told him firmly. "You can't smoke in the dining room."

Mike could see that I was upset. He raised his eyebrows quizzically as I passed, but there was no time to tell him what had happened. For the next two hours I sautéed, puréed, whipped, and stirred, Big Charlie never far from my thoughts. What could I do about his threat? Pay? Risk an accident? No solution came to mind.

As I worked I kept an eye on the dining room. Big Charlie did enjoy the meal. He nodded over the *Daurade Farci Aux Amandes* and smiled (a grim smile to be sure) when he tasted the *Tarte aux Pommes*.

When coffee was served, I saw his hand stray to his jacket pocket as if for a cigar, only he caught himself and brought his hand away empty. I took his check to his table myself.

"How was everything?" I asked.

"Very good. Excellent food. I'll be back." He pulled out a hefty bankroll, held by a gold clip, and paid the bill, leaving an enormous tip for Marie. She'd be pleased at any rate.

Everyone has a different way of dealing with problems. You might think, being in the line of work I am, that I'd eat. Or break dishes. I know some chefs who throw knives. But when I'm upset I cook. So in a way Big Charlie's threat was good for business. I came up with three variations on my basic paté the next day. But no solution to my dilemma.

The next time Big Charlie came in I took his order myself, a practice I followed with extremely difficult or especially favored customers. I suggested the veal, one of my new specialties. It was called *Escalopes de Veau Chasseau*, but privately I thought of it as *Escalopes de Veau Grand Charles* because he'd been on my mind when I'd created it.

"Delicious," Big Charlie told me when he'd finished eating. "I never tasted anything quite like that before. What was it?"

"Veal," I told him, "In a mushroom, tomato, and wine sauce with my own combination of herbs."

"Aaaah. Mama used to make that. Only she called it *Scallopini*.

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I never liked it when I was a boy. But the way you make it . . ." He kissed two fingers and held them in the air. "Reasonable prices, too." He leaned toward me. "You could charge more here, you know. Two-three dollars more a plate. You wouldn't have any trouble paying up then."

"I can't." I shook my head. "We wouldn't attract the same crowd. The students would never be able to afford it. Things would change and I don't want them to."

"You think about it," he said, sounding almost fatherly. "You have until next month, remember."

"I know. How could I forget?"

Big Charlie started coming in regularly, twice a week. I didn't want to see him, much less feed him. On the other hand, I was proud of my cooking. And I enjoyed his appreciation.

Still, fantasies of how to get rid of him occupied me on and off during the day. I'd find the perfect, undetectable poison and slip it into his espresso. Stab him behind the ear with a stiletto. I who couldn't bring myself to set a mousetrap! How could I kill a man?

The tension kept me on my toes in the kitchen, though. During that second week I turned out one inventive dish after another to the delight of my regulars. We hadn't planned to invite the critics yet, but someone must have tipped them off. It could have been the junior editor of *The Times*. Or maybe Big Charlie sent them. In any case, once the write-ups appeared, there was no denying our success. You couldn't get in without a reservation.

Still, profits were limited. They'd always be unless we raised our prices, cut down on the quality of the food, or pushed the tables closer together. If we paid off Big Charlie, he'd come out ahead. It made me furious to think of his walking off with most of our profits.

We'd gone over our options again and again. There had to be a way out—if only we could think of it. But Mike was leaving the final decision up to me. "You're the cook," he said. "The owner. You're Rochelle. Either we pay or we don't pay. We could sell the restaurant, you know. I can always go back to the Welfare Department. You'll get another job. We won't starve. It'll be easier than running this place. And safer than ending up in the river in a hunk of cement."

"But we can't give it up. Not after all our work, all our planning. The restaurant's exactly the way I dreamed it would be. I can't lose it!"

"Then we'll pay him what he asks, honey." Mike held me tenderly.

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He was a man in a million. "It isn't worth getting hurt for. And he's a guy who'll do what he says. I can smell it."

On Friday I served a shoulder of lamb stuffed with rosemary-flavored wild rice. And I found the answer to a problem that had eluded me for years—the perfect substitute for truffles.

I didn't see Big Charlie come in. I didn't even know he was there until the new waitress we'd had to hire whispered, "There's someone who says he wants to see you out front."

Big Charlie was sitting at a table for four that I knew had been reserved for one of the art teachers. He leered at me as I approached. "It looked as if I wouldn't get a table tonight," he said. "You're doing very well."

"How did you? I thought we were booked up."

"You were. But I found some twerp who was willing to settle for twenty bucks instead of a table. Simple, my dear. Money. Money always wins out. Money and power."

I felt myself steaming. He had them both. Money and power. Enough for his needs. More than enough. Five hundred dollars a month wouldn't make a bit of difference to him—not the way it would to us.

"My compliments to the chef. You're getting better and better." He waved his arm around the room. "A big success. Every table filled. People lining up to get in."

"Yes. We're doing all right. But it took years of training. And we don't make as much as you might think in a restaurant. There are all kinds of expenses."

"I know. I know. Don't you think I costed it before I gave you a price? You can manage the five hundred. Maybe not easily, but you can manage."

I stalked into the kitchen and began mincing parsley with a vengeance. Money didn't mean anything to him. I didn't mean anything to him. He just wanted to control me, run my restaurant. I'd be working for Big Charlie instead of for myself. I almost wished I was one of those knife-throwing chefs—I'd show him a thing or two.

The waitresses finished cleaning up and left. I told Mike to go on home, I needed to work late. I started preparations for an aspic, *Hue de Saumon au Citron et au Poivre Vert*, a time-consuming dish, but I needed to think. Maybe I could figure out a plan while waiting for the layers to jell. There had to be something we hadn't thought of, some way to keep the money and stay safe.

Finally, as I was shaving thin slices of lemon for the garnish, I

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came up with a fantastic plan. Only I didn't know if I could pull it off. A lot depended on Big Charlie. But more depended on me, whether I could make him knuckle under, the way he wanted me to.

Big Charlie made a reservation for late Friday night, the date the money was due. I was so nervous all week that I outdid myself, creating two new dessert soufflés, one with pears, the other with oranges and Cointreau. And I planned to serve *Truite en Papillote a L'Aneth et au Citron*, an impressive dish.

On Friday I waited until Big Charlie finished his coffee, then brought his check to his table. "Ready for me?" he asked.

I nodded. "Come into my office," I said. "It's more private there."

I sat down behind my desk, put his check face down in front of me, and waited until he was seated. I was nervous, yet strangely at ease now that the time had come.

"You can smoke in here if you like," I told him.

He took a cigar from an inner pocket, snipped off one end, and lit up. "Well," he said between puffs. "Let's have the money."

I watched the smoke drifting past me, steadying myself for what I had to say.

"Was everything all right tonight?" I asked.

"Of course. I already told you. You make the best food I've ever had. And it's comfortable here, too. Not like them snooty places uptown. Why else do you think I come here twice a week regular? I've never eaten so well in my life."

I was hoping he'd say that—counting on it, as a matter of fact. I tried to play on his sympathies. "Listen. You know we work hard here, Mike and I. Harder than when we had regular jobs. I'm at the market most mornings before six. And I'm here till long after midnight."

"But you love it."

"That's true. But you'll be bleeding us, skimming the cream from the milk, taking the meringue off the top of the pie."

Big Charlie shrugged. "Hey! It's my business."

"Please." I tried one more time. "Can't you let us off?"

"Are you kidding? If word got around that Big Charlie let anyone off the hook—" He made a slicing motion across his neck. "That would be it. I can't, even if I wanted to."

I knew then he'd never change his mind. "All right," I said. "I guess we'll have to pay—somehow."

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I handed him the check. He turned it over, looked at the amount I'd put down, and turned red.

"Eighty-five dollars!" he exploded. "What's that for? The bill's usually twenty, maybe twenty-five bucks. What's going on?"

"A special bill for a special customer," I explained, hoping he couldn't hear the pounding of my heart. "I'm going to have extra expenses from now on that have to be covered."

He did a quick calculation. "Eighty-five dollars a meal, that's a hundred and seventy a week—about seven hundred bucks a month. You mean you're making it up on *me*?"

I nodded.

Big Charlie slammed his hand on the table and stood up. I thought he might hit me. Instead he began pacing back and forth. He could only manage two steps in either direction in my small office. Big Charlie said something in a language I didn't understand, then he slammed his fist on my desk and made a roaring sound. At first I thought it was anger, then I realized he was laughing.

"All right. All right," he sputtered. "I'll pay the bill, all the bills, every time I'm here. Only tell me. How come it's eighty-five dollars, seven hundred a month, instead of five? You only have to pay me five, right?"

"Yes," I told him sweetly. "I need five hundred for protection money. But you still have to pay for your dinner, don't you?"

Big Charlie put a hundred-dollar bill on my desk, shook his head, and started toward the door. "See you on Tuesday," he said. "And make sure there's a table for me—a good one. Tell any twerp who's waiting, 'Big Charlie's first.' Remember, my usual days, Tuesday and Friday."

"I'll remember." He'd better keep coming, I told myself. Knowing that Big Charlie would be around regularly would keep me on my toes, nervous enough to assure perfection. I had to keep him as a satisfied customer.

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

TRADE PAPERBACKS: Mysteries in higher-priced trade paperback editions, sold mainly in bookstores and rarely seen in the mass-market racks at newsstands and supermarkets, have grown in popularity to the point where more than a half dozen publishers regularly issue titles in this format. There's little doubt that Agatha Christie is the most popular mass-market mystery author, with some eighty titles currently in print. But who is the most popular mystery writer in trade paperbacks?

I'd venture a guess that it's Robert van Gulik (1910–1967), the Dutch writer who translated an old Chinese detective story about Judge Dee, a Seventh Century magistrate, and then went on to write sixteen more books about the character. At present no less than fifteen Judge Dee books are in print in trade paperback editions: eight in the Scribner Crime Classics series, four from the University of Chicago Press, and three (in two volumes) from Dover Publications.

Scribners also recently published a $9.95 paperback edition of *Crime Times Three,* containing three memorable early novels by P. D. James—*Cover Her Face, A Mind To Murder,* and *Shroud for a Nightingale.* Dover added to its imposing mystery list with the first American edition of J. C. Masterman's *An Oxford Tragedy* (1933) and a new edition of Anna Katharine Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878). Harper & Row's Perennial Library added Hillary Waugh's two best novels, *Last Seen Wearing* and *The Missing Man.* And the Boston publisher David R. Godine launched Godine Double Detectives, featuring two novels in one trade paperback. First title in this series is *The Rocksburg Railroad Murders & The Blank Page* by K. C. Constantine.

SPY DOSSIER: A new illustrated quarterly for fans of espionage, real and fictional, has been launched with publication of the first issue of *The Dossier.* Cleverly designed to look like a top-secret-file folder, the magazine devotes half of its 32 pages to various aspects of the James Bond books and films, including a history of the Carl Walther Company, maker of Bond's favorite pistol, and an interview with British author John Gardner, who is continuing the Bond saga. Other articles deal with codes

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and ciphers, and real-life spy Rudolph Abel. A 48-page second issue is now in preparation. Subscriptions are $12.00 per year, payable to *The Dossier,* from Richard L. Knudson, Editor, The Dossier, State University College, Oneonta, NY 13820.

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT: Among the many contributions of Raven House since it launched its series of paperback mysteries last September has been the luring of fine writers like Edgar-winner William Campbell Gault back to the mystery field. It's been nineteen years since Gault's last adult book, though he has earned fame as a writer of teenage sports novels. Now, with *The Bad Samaritan* and *The Cana Diversion,* his detective Brock "the Rock" Callahan is back in business. Both are coming from Raven House early this year, with more to follow.

ILLUSTRATED HISTORY: Stein & Day has published the first American edition of Peter Haining's *Mystery! An Illustrated History of Crime & Detective Fiction.* This $16.95 hardcover volume, first published in England in 1977, is more "illustrated" than "history," with Haining's brief text serving only to introduce each section of illustrations from pre-World War II magazines. Several paintings and covers reproduced in color in the British edition appear only in black-and-white here.

BOUCHERCON: Video and audio tapes of last October's Bouchercon XII are available from Video Magic, Inc., 3521 South 68th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53220. And plans are proceeding for this year's Bouchercon XIII in San Francisco. Details may be obtained from Don Herron, Chairman. 437 Jones Street #9207, San Francisco, CA 94102. Bouchercon XIV is tentatively set for New York in 1983, once more chaired by Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Harper & Row will publish a collection of John D. MacDonald's pulp stories, *The Good Old Stuff,* this spring, edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Walter and Jean Shine.

Nevins and Greenberg are also editing a new series, "The Mystery Makers," for Southern Illinois University Press. The first two volumes, due this spring or summer, will be collections of short stories by Anthony Boucher (introduced by Nevins) and Christianna Brand (introduced by Robert E. Briney). More on this series later.

Robert Ludlum's first new novel in two years, *The Parsifal Mosaic,* is coming from Random House in March. The following month, Bantam Books reprints *The Road to Gandolfo* for the first time under the Ludlum name. This 1975 suspense novel originally appeared under Ludlum's pseudonym, Michael Shepherd.

Mickey Spillane has completed *Complex 90,* his first new Mike Hammer novel in twelve years.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

There have been films about undercover cops since Jimmy Cagney joined the mob to get the goods on Prohibition crime czars, but none has been as potent and troubling and real as Sidney Lumet's *Prince of the City*—taken from the non-fiction book by Robert Daley *(Target Blue)*, a writer well versed in big-city police operations. Sharp as a mortuary razor, the film dissects layer upon layer of corruption with horrifying thrust. It is a powerful, true story, leaving you at the finish disturbed and uncertain as to who the heroes actually were.

The villain, though, is clear: the heroin traffic strangling New York. By the 1970's it was conceded that drug-dealing was the thriving industry of the city's underworld, and there was a direct parallel between the availability of heroin and the lack of official effort to fight corruption —obviously dealers were receiving a degree of police protection. To ferret out the drug operation, an elite force of police investigators called the Special Investigating Unit had been formed.

Seventy men strong, working in teams of four, completely unsupervised with the run of the city, immune to red tape, these detectives operated with such flair they were called "princes" of the town—cops that had no assigned precinct, set hours, time cards, or paperwork. Cops whose only job was to produce arrests. But there had been disturbing rumors that corruption had eaten into the ranks of the SIU. Heroin in giant quantities had been withheld in drug busts; money confiscated from drug dealers had been split between the police making the arrest.

An attorney for the investigative Knapp Commission approaches a young SIU unit leader, Danny Ciello (the name the film gives to real-life policeman Robert Leuci, played with brooding intensity by Treat Williams), hoping that he will turn informant. An uneasy alliance is formed.

Ciello angrily tells the federal man that the real wrong-doers are in the judicial system—a system that releases arrested criminals virtually overnight, that allows glib lawyers and unethical bail bondsmen to work legal loopholes, that lets judges buy their authority with cash or political clout. And none of them are actually in the trenches of the war against crime, while the police are. "The vast majority of cops are good, honest, law-abiding, family-loving, decent men. They're all that stands between you and the jungle." Good cops are entitled to bend the law or accept occasional rewards so long as they get the job done. A "gift" of heroin to an addict every once in a while prolonged his usefulness as a "stoolie"—SIU men regularly stockpiled confiscated drugs for this purpose. Pocketing the cash netted in drug arrests was sometimes the only form of punishment meted out to dealers, who always seemed to be set free unscathed.

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Ciella finally agrees to become an undercover federal informant, if only to expose crooked bondsmen and judges and the rogue cops who allow them to flourish. He will set up "meets," pass marked money, allow himself to be "miked." But under no circumstances will he work against his friends or former unit-members. "The first thing a cop learns is he can't trust nobody but his partners. Nobody cares about me but my partners. I sleep with my wife but I live with my partners. I will never give them up."

From the first moment Ciello has "turned," his life becomes a moral torment, agonized by the corruption surrounding him. His wife relates that the spouse of a fellow cop had always declared her husband was "snow white," but one day "I saw her in the bank depositing four hundred one-dollar bills"—clear indication of payoffs. He learns his police mentor, a mounted patrolman who had risen through the ranks, has mob connections. Further, his testimony has emblazoned the careers of the federal investigators working with him, and they have been promoted to higher posts, leaving him with strangers, distrustful and hostile, pressing him with Inquisitorial zeal to inform on his friends and, worse yet, himself.

The very legal machinery of which he had been at the core was now turning its wheels against him. Was he really as "clean" as he had claimed? How extensive were his transgressions and perks? Had he perjured himself on the witness stand? (Ciello is allowed to say that in the dangerous street world of an undercover cop disguise is so constant that lying becomes a way of life: "I don't know what the truth is any more.") Finally, more than fifty detectives of the SIU are indicted for corruption.

Sidney Lumet, who has done crime films as diverse as *Serpico* and *Murder on the Orient Express*, has drawn a terrifying portrait of the pressures policemen face. We are complaisant about kickbacks and padded expense accounts in this modern world, he says, "but we expect our police to plunge into the rottenest sector of society and come up clean." They have the highest suicide and alcoholism rates of any profession. And surely face the most moral quandaries. "I know the law," reflects Danny Ciello at one point, "but the law doesn't know the street."

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INTERVIEW: GEORGE BAXT (2)

This is the conclusion of an interview that began in the previous issue.

EQMN: What sent you to London?

BAXT: I was brought to London by producer Hannah Weinstein in 1957—she was then doing *Robin Hood, The Buccaneers*, etc.—to write six scripts for a half-hour series called *Sword of Freedom* to star Edmund Purdom. I was recommended by a publicist and scriptwriter named

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Peggy Phillips, who was in London working for Hannah. I had by now begun making my name in live TV in New York with scripts I wrote for such then prestigious programs as *Philco, Kraft,* and *Matinee Theater.*

EQMN: Did you like London?

BAXT: I went there for three months and stayed five years. In 1968 I went there for four weeks and stayed another five years. In 1978 I had a play produced in London and would have stayed but there was no work. At this moment, my one desire is to return to London and live and die there. I wish to be cremated at Golders Green Crematorium—which isn't far from where Jack the Ripper operated.

EQMN: How do you feel about Los Angeles?

BAXT: I took myself to L.A. in 1973 when the bottom dropped out of the film industry in London. Columnist Liz Smith in the *Daily News* quoted me recently as follows: "Hollywood is the only place in the world where even nobodies don't return your phone call." And my most recently published novel, *The Neon Graveyard* (St. Martin's, 1979), tells you by the title how I feel about the place.

EQMN: How about New York City?

BAXT: New York is the first home and always will be. Today it's dirty, squalid, and still more exhilarating than suicide. But I'd prefer to be in London.

EQMN: In the January 1, 1982 issue of *EQMM,* Clark Howard told novice writers to forget about writing schools and how-to books and just sit down and write, not to force it. He said to let it come naturally—that way it will be the best you can do. Do you agree?

BAXT: I certainly do. I will only add: write what you have experienced and write to please yourself. If you're happy with the result, someone else is bound to be. Don't fight a rewrite if the objections are reasonable, but don't rewrite for someone whose opinion you don't respect unless they're paying you a lot of money. I speak only from Hollywood experience here!

EQMN: What are your own writing practices?

BAXT: I think I'm quite fortunate that I've had eight novels and an equal number of short stories published. I've written Lord knows how many films and TV scripts that have been produced, and mostly successfully. I've seen three plays produced, one in the London West End—and, frankly, unless I'm mortally broke I write when the mood moves me. Right now it's short stories and a new play I'm working on. I completed a new novel in 1980 and believe it or not have yet to find a publisher.

EQMN: What kinds of people do you like and dislike?

BAXT: I like people who are faithful, honest, trustworthy, laugh a lot, occasionally pick up the check or pick up the phone to say hello, and these are hard to find. I don't like rivals, professional especially. Meaning those who feel rivalry towards me. As far as I'm concerned, I have no rivals. There's room for everyone. I don't like liars, phonies (I spot them immediately), and promisers (I'll do this for you, I'll do that for you). Frankly, in the past three years I've grown to enjoy myself immensely and have become a bit of a loner. It's also less expensive.

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EQMN: What entertainment do you like?

BAXT: I dote on watching old movies on TV, especially New York's cable channel 10 where they're so old it's like attending a memorial. I read mostly bio and autobio and books on film and theater. I read very little fiction.

I loathe rock but the savage breast will always be soothed by Brahms. I see almost all the plays because, luckily, in New York most of my friends work in the theater, so I get lots of freebies. Otherwise, who could afford it? The theater was my first love. I got my start writing plays back in 1944 when the great Audrey Wood became my first agent and I still keep a hand in.

EQMN: What's your idea of a perfect day?

BAXT: My idea of a perfect day is a terrific lunch, complete with two bloody marys, with an amiable companion; a movie followed by a short nap; open the mail and several large checks drop on the desk; then a lovely cocktail hour with a friend or friends, very dry vodka martini on the rocks and scrub the garbage; a superb dinner or late supper if we're going to the theater.

EQMN: Is there anything else you'd like to comment on?

BAXT: Haven't I said enough?

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Vincent Bugliosi prosecuted the Manson family as a Los Angeles assistant district attorney and produced a bestseller about the experience *(Helter Skelter)*. Now Bugliosi and a collaborator have written a novel that some have called a brief against the parole of Charles Manson. While that idea may have motivated it in part, it is not the cheap *roman à clef* or dramatized polemic the label would suggest.

*** Vincent Bugliosi and Ken Hurwitz: *Shadow of Cain*, Norton, $12.95. Ray Lomak, who killed several of his high school classmates one evening twenty-one years before, is paroled from prison born again and repentant. Seeming almost an Elmer Gantry-for-the-'80s, he is soon directing a group of charities for a death-fearing former cowboy star. By the end of the book, though, he is again on trial for murder, and for once a novel enlists reader sympathy on the side of the prosecutor. Though some of the other characters are a bit flat, Lomak is a complex, fascinating, and terrifyingly believable figure. As would be expected, the trial scenes are expert, with the closing argument for the defense a particularly brilliant exercise.

*** J. C. Masterman: *An Oxford Tragedy*, Dover, $3.50. Incredible as it may seem, this apparently is the first American edition of a rather celebrated 1933 detective novel. Viennese lawyer Ernst Brendel, a visiting lecturer at St. Thomas's College,

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Oxford, collects English slang and solves the murder of a widely disliked don. Though not as fine a performance to me as some have found it—the final summing up seems unusually anticlimactic—this vintage item will charm admirers of the cozy collegiate mystery.

*** Paula Gosling: *Solo Blues,* Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, $12.95. British pianist Johnny Cosatelli faces the conflict of jazz and the classics, the murder of his former girl friend, and various threats on his life and hands in a solid action-suspense story of the mystery-without-detection sort. Gosling delivers good writing and character drawing and a credible yet surprising killer.

*** W. J. Burley: *Charles and Elizabeth,* Walker, $9.95. Here is a rare bird indeed: a male gothic. Schoolteacher Brian Kenyon begins to identify (to the point of time travel) with the son of a Nineteenth Century Cornish family in a country estate called Treagar. Completely different from Burley's Wycliffe novels, this involving, delicately written fantasy would probably not have the mystery label save for the author's reputation.

*** Max Collins: *Hush Money,* Pinnacle, $1.95. The fourth adventure of Nolan and his comics-collecting sidekick Jon, more somber than earlier titles in the series, concerns mob-family infighting in Des Moines, complicated by the activities of an avenging Vietnam veteran. (In another series, he might be the hero.) The telling and construction are as good as ever, and the finale is especially satisfying.

*** Douglas Clark: *Roast Eggs,* Dodd, Mead, $8.95. Here, coincidentally, is another courtroom story where the reader roots for the prosecution. Scotland Yard's Masters and Green are called in to help bolster the case against a man accused of killing his wife by burning their house down—they must do their rapid detective work on the weekend between direct and cross examination of the defendant. It's a pure intellectual puzzle, very traditional in style and mood but with a refreshingly original angle.

** Robert Traver: *People Versus Kirk,* St. Martin's, $12.95. Unlike the author's celebrated *Anatomy of a Murder,* this courtroom novel is a genuine detective story, albeit a painfully transparent one. Though out of court Traver is the dullest novelist imaginable, his trial scenes do not fail to fascinate. Hard-core legal buffs like me will find wading through the ornate dialogue and awkward exposition worthwhile. Others won't.

** Eric Bercovici: *So Little Cause for Caroline,* Atheneum, $10.95. A prime example of the movie-treatment-disguised-as-novel, this West Coast private-eye tale doesn't have the originality or resonance to make it as a book. In fact, it would probably be rather routine as a movie without dynamite casting of the main parts.

** Don Pendleton: *The New War,* Gold Eagle, $1.95. The Executioner #39, first from a new publisher, changes Mack Bolan's target group from the Mafia to international terrorists, but otherwise it's the same mixture as before. Pure action devotees—especially those (unlike this reviewer) who don't gag on solemn macho posturing—won't be disappointed.

Carter Dickson's (John Dickson Carr's) *The Department of Queer*

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Complaints (1940) has been a mystery fiction paradox: it's probably one of the most famous volumes of detective short stories, but just try to find a copy. Now, fortunately, you can.

The eleven stories, seven about Colonel March, are available in a new hardcover edition (Gregg Press, $13.95), with a short but well wrought appreciation by Richard Levinson and William Link. That a book as fine as this should have been out of print for so long is an impossible crime of the publishing world, now happily solved.

Lawrence Treat's *Crime and Puzzlement* (David R. Godine, $4.95), based on a series of picture mysteries from the '30s with new illustrations by Leslie Cabarga, is (to put it briefly) the best collection of mystery puzzles I've ever seen, full of wit and clever clueing.

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"Q"

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Leonard Habas,
Vice President of Circulation

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Four men were left alive after the plane crashed. One of them had an obsession—he had to get back to Myra . . .

SOLE SURVIVOR

by JEFFRY SCOTT

The last thing Gordon Miller had said—he'd been muttering the same thing off and on since the plane crash—was, "I've got to get back to Myra." Now he was dead and I was doing it for him.

According to TV and the newspapers, I was the sole survivor of The Worst Journey in the World. Which it wasn't, by a long chalk, though bad enough to take seven lives. The publicity, which I found sickening, was wrong on another count. "Wórst" can be a subjective evaluation, settled in the beholder's eye, like beauty.

The worst journey in the world was here—five yards of garden path leading up to a blue-painted front door with a 1930s sunburst of stained glass in its upper half. Spring flowers were out—daffodils and grape hyacinths and the first warily proud tulips. The grass needed mowing, because Gordon Miller wasn't there to do it.

I didn't feel very special, but that was an illusion. I'd lost some toes to frostbite, making me walk like a drunk; but physically, I was fine. The craven side of my nature was trying to give me an easy way out. The street was narrow, the cab still fussing to turn round; I could run for cover by telling the cabbie I'd come to the wrong address and wanted to get back to central London.

I walked up the path. It was pretty much the sort of house I'd expected, semidetached, not large. As a semiskilled manual worker, Gordon Miller had been the only nonprofessional member of the project. Wincing at my own snobbery, I pressed the bell.

Mrs. Miller—the Myra I'd stopped him from seeing any more—wasn't at all what I expected. No beauty, but attractive enough, and fiercely intelligent. Before I could speak, she shook her head wonderingly. "Why on earth did you come?"

"You know who I am?"

She motioned me inside. "Your picture's been on the TV news and

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all the front pages. Of course I know you." It was almost teasing, not sarcastic. Mrs. Miller had a long slender back and hips swaying her pleated skirt to a pleasant swirl as she led me into the living room.

Now I could understand why Gordon Miller had been so determined to get back.

"You wrote to me," she said. "Do sit down. I've not had any practice—I wasn't sure what to do about the condolence letters. You needn't have come, you know."

It was going to be harder than I'd imagined, and the imaginings had been bad. There was a pair of man's slippers, plaid, rundown at the heels, under the hallstand, and a cold dead pipe in a brass bowl on the mantlepiece. Miller's presence, or perhaps his permanent absence, shouted in such artifacts.

"I wanted to, Mrs. Miller. Some things . . . you can't, I can't, put down on paper."

"Oh, dear." Her elbows were on her knees, chin on palms. Wide mouth, triangle eyes, a strong chin. The words sounded comical and consoling, and were meant to be. I wasn't exactly irritated, but my heart sank.

"Er, Gordon, your husband, thought a lot about you."

"That's true." She sat back and jerked a cigarette out of the pack that had been lying on the arm of her chair, lighting it while I still fumbled for matches.

The click of the lighter sounded loud, too loud for reality, and got mixed up in my mind with the noises our seat belts had made, just before the plane went down . . .

"Belt yourselves in, chaps." Ferguson, the pilot, craned back at us. "No sweat, but there might be a bit of turbulence."

He was lying. Compasses can go crazy, in that part of the world, and I suspected that we were lost. I wasn't a pilot, but one didn't need a lot of background knowledge to be aware that we should have touched down on the mainland at least an hour and a half earlier. It wasn't that big a plane, either; fuel must be low.

There was a boil on Ferguson's neck, rubbed angry by his white collar. It had been at the fringe of my consciousness throughout the flight, somehow. Now it was huge, a sullen, bursting, circular throb of red, impossibly huge.

Nothing to do with Ferguson. My head hurt. It was the sun, setting. The snow flurries were gone, I was looking at the sun, and—

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Gordon Miller slapped my face. "Come on, Doc!" I wasn't sitting behind Ferguson any more. I wasn't sitting. I was lying in the snow. Why was Miller wearing Ferguson's anorak?

Miller anticipated my questions. "We crashed, Doc. That silly sod flew us into the side of a mountain. Way off course, stands to reason. I reckon we're on the mainland, about fifty miles from Port Consort . . . maybe."

He was shaking me. I whimpered and tried to lie back on the yielding, feathery pillows. "Come on, Doc! I've got to get back, got to make it. Got to. Got to get back to Myra."

"You've taken the pilot's anorak." That seemed important, worrying and annoying me.

"He doesn't need it, I do. He's dead, you idiot. So's the co-pilot, and old Reddie. Just me and you and Silver and Tanton. It'll be only three of us if you don't get a grip on yourself."

Miller was shouting and I wanted to cry. I'd felt vaguely sorry for him, ever since he came to the research station. A drawer of water and hewer of wood, except that he worked with machinery. A natural leader, except that we all outranked and outearned him.

A very British abbreviation doomed Gordon Miller: Peelu, or P.L.U, meaning People Like Us. Miller wasn't, and that emerged during our monthly soccer match on the cleared, stamped-flat wasteland of snow behind the huts. You couldn't really run; you could simply waddle and shuffle—it was a jokey, self-mocking parody devised to cheer us up.

Miller had taken it seriously though, shouting in frozen gray puffs of obscenity, running frantically and tackling savagely. So the games had stopped, and he was first puzzled, then resentful.

"On your feet, Doc, let's see what's broken, if anything. Come on! Otherwise we'll leave you. Got to get moving."

"No! Miller, Gordon, we can't, mustn't. Must stay with the aircraft. First rule . . . They'll be looking for it."

Peter Silver, our geologist, pushed past Miller. "I've been telling him that, Sandy. The idiot won't listen."

Miller hit him. Silver fell and picked himself up, then I lost sight of him as Miller hauled me upright. "Listen, we were lost, get it? They'll never find the wreckage. Port Consort's our only chance. There's a dinghy in the plane, I've ripped it open. Silver carries it, Bill Tanton takes what I've ripped out of the fuselage, then we'll have a tent. We can make two miles before it gets dark. Head for that peak, first off, it's the right direction."

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My head reeled, but I could walk, after a fashion. The plane was unrecognizable—there'd been enough fuel left for it to burn. Melted snow and ice, refrozen, made an ugly rosette around the skeletal jumble, already bloomed with frost.

"I'll go it alone if I must," Miller threatened. "I've got to see Myra again! But there's stuff to be carried, if we're to make it. Come on, Doc, work and I'll save you."

"You don't have to upset yourself. I'm not a priest, I don't hear confessions." Myra Miller smiled to take the sting from her outburst. "The *Sunday Times* had a two-page reconstruction, with schematics, so I know what happened."

"I wanted to see you."

She shrugged tiredly. "A bit out of date—the senior officer visiting the next of kin. Maybe you're a romantic."

"Nobody's ever called me that," I said miserably.

"I was trying to be kind. I'm a social worker, you know. 'Types' is a label that makes me see red. All the same, you strike me as a man with a great hunger for guilt. Forgive me . . . if not hunger, then you're vulnerable, the way accident-prone people are vulnerable to mishaps."

"Mrs. Miller!"

"Don't get in a state, now. I'm going to make tea for us, and you're going to sit and ponder on how lucky you are to be here. I mean that—I'm glad for you. You're manifestly a nice man who deserves to be alive."

"No! No, I'm not. I killed him, I caused his death."

Myra Miller stubbed out her cigarette. "Oh, dear. I thought it might be that. Your letter . . . I'm sorry, but it wasn't quite rational, you know. I assumed you were still ill." She sat up, face masklike. "Better talk about it. I doubt I could stop you anyway."

"I have to tell somebody. Believe me, Mrs. Miller—"

"Myra."

"Believe me, I've no wish to upset you, but getting back was a quest for him, and you were—well, its object, its goal, if you will. I must tell you, and then you can take what action you wish . . . Gordon was a natural leader, I recognized that very early on."

"Dominating," she agreed. "I wanted him to go back to college. He had a strong urge to give orders, and without qualifications—"

"Yes. Anyway, he took charge after the crash. I'd have gone by the book, stayed near the aircraft, and doomed us all, finished us."

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She nodded watchfully.

"Silver had salvaged emergency rations, but it was the cold that threatened us more than anything. Bill Tanton, the physicist, was the oldest man in our party. He couldn't keep up. I was still concussed, I think . . . that might be an excuse. Bill wasn't there, a few hours after dawn, the next day. I got it into my head that Gordon had left him behind, deliberately."

Her question startled me. "Had he done that? You raise the possibility, but your tone knocks it down."

"Well . . . No, Gordon wouldn't have been so callous. It was just that I had some kind of blackout, and the next thing I knew, Gordon was carrying the light metal struts, for the tent, that Bill Tanton had been carrying. When I asked . . . Gordon wouldn't tell me. He sort of cuffed me around the head. Shouted to keep going. It was for my own good, he said.

"Then Dr. Silver vanished. We were struggling over an area of rotten ice. It was my fault. He was in front of me—I should have realized he'd fallen.

"Eventually we got to the ridge above Port Consort. It used to be a whaling station, now there's a construction site there, a support base for offshore oil exploration.

"Food is of crucial importance, in those conditions. We had these self-heating tins, for hot meals. Gordon and I shared the last one, to gain strength for climbing the ridge. But when we got there, we saw that unless we climbed down it meant another day's journey to get to safety, and we'd die on the last lap."

She got out of the chair and put an arm around me. "It's all right. You needn't distress yourself—people can only do their best."

I might have accepted the escape route of her compassion, and then I noticed Miller's pipe above the fireplace, and it was no good.

"I didn't—I didn't do my best! He slipped, Gordon slipped, and he grabbed me. I could have held on to him. I could! But . . . I remembered Tanton and Silver, and . . . and I pulled free. I was *glad* when he fell! I killed him."

Mrs. Miller looked down at me. "Why, Dr. Sanderson? Why tell me all this? You were half frozen to death, you'd had a blow to the head, you were at the end of your tether. Nobody could expect you to save another man, not in those circumstances."

She stepped back. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"He loved you! He was driven by just that one thought of returning. All that driving need to get back, and you don't care!"

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"So now I'm the one in the wrong."

"No, no, I'm sorry. Unforgivable. I'm overwrought, Mrs. Miller. I just took it for granted, with Gordon so intent on being with you again . . ." I wiped my palms on my jacket. "I thought you must love him very much, as he did you. I think you probably do. You're trying to put on a brave face, to make me feel better."

Pointing at the pipe on the mantelpiece, I admitted, "I'm a fool. His things are still here, waiting for him. Of course you loved him."

Myra Miller sat down again, quickly, as if her legs had lost rigidity. Reaching up, she took the pipe out of the bowl. "Oh, dear," she repeated, to herself this time.

"*His* things? You *are* a romantic, Dr. Sanderson. Gordon never smoked, it was the one vice he missed. This belongs to a very nice, a lovely man, who's been living with me for the last year—ever since Gordon got the job with you. The day he left, the happiest day of my life, I started divorce proceedings. If you did kill him, which I doubt, then you achieved something I'd daydreamed of since a month or so after we got married and I discovered what he was. A bully, a boor, a very cunning, very nasty, thoroughly bad lot. Clear, Doctor?"

Her tone didn't alter, but her eyes blazed. "Don't look at me that way."

"I'm sorry. It's such a tragedy. Whatever you say, he loved you like life itself. His one aim, his only wish, was to be with you again."

"The trouble with being a romantic," she said, "is that you risk getting things backwards. Rose-colored glasses make fine blinders. Yes, Gordon was obsessed with seeing me again. No, he didn't love me. Wrong emotion—he hated me."

Rising, she went to a bureau in the corner. "You received letters once a month, I believe, when the supply plane came in. One of my neighbors must have written to Gordon, telling him I wasn't living alone. Read that."

Miller's writing was familiar, from weekly equipment-state reports I'd had to initial. Sick and ugly phrases made me flinch, but the final sentence leaped out at me.

"Damn you! I won't be stuck here forever. I'll be back soon and I'll kill you and that fancy man you're keeping."

She retrieved the letter. "There's talk of you getting a medal, Dr. Sanderson. You must accept it, whatever your lust for guilt. You see, I'm sure that you saved my life."

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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY T. PARRY

A paper boy often sees some mighty strange and scary sights on his route, especially when he is watching from his private bird blind . . .

BIRD BLIND

by HENRY T. PARRY

I had finished my paper route at sunrise and was in my bird blind out at Quarry Pond when I saw a man come down the path and drop Joe Harney's body into the water. He turned around, walked back up the path, and disappeared in the bushes, never once looking back, as if he had dumped a bag of trash.

It wasn't the first time I had seen Joe Harney out there, or at least Joe Harney's delivery truck. Quarry Pond was in the woods a few feet in from the Ridge Road on the old Kreshmer farm, and some mornings when I was putting Mrs. Kreshmer's paper in the mailbox at the end of her lane—I been delivering papers for nearly a year now, ever since I was twelve—I would see Joe's grocery truck in the gravelled space that had been cleared out of the woods around the mailbox.

My bird blind was in the woods near the edge of the pond, maybe twenty or thirty feet away from the parking space, but you couldn't see it. I had made it with pine branches and fixed it up real nice with an old rug on the ground because Mom complained that the ooze at the edge of the pond was making my clothes smell like the Great Dismal Swamp.

And it wasn't the first time I had seen the man who dropped Joe Harney into the water either. One morning earlier in the summer, when I was putting Mrs. Kreshmer's paper in the mailbox, I saw a

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car, a brand-new 1923 Packard straight-six touring, the kind with the silver statue on the radiator cap, standing in the parking space right next to Joe Harney's delivery truck. The car was plastered with mud and looked as if it had been driven for a long distance at high speed, and had a hard-used look as if the man who drove it didn't care about it except to drive it as hard as he could.

The front door of the car was open and a pair of ankle-high boots stuck out, stitched all fancy around the top. The man lying asleep across the front seat had long hair as if he had been living someplace where you can't get to a barber, and was dressed in clothes that he could never have bought at George Richard's Togs for Men Shop in town. His skin was brown from the sun, and he had the same hard-used look that his car had.

I stood there without making a sound, just looking at him, and before I could notice it, he was watching me, but with only one eye open, a brown, stained kind of eye. We looked at each other and neither of us moved or said a word, but somehow his hand was in the glove compartment of his car. I backed away, afraid to turn around, just like you would if you were kneeling to drink at a spring and raised your head and saw a copperhead on the other side of the water, coiled and waiting.

I didn't say anything to Dad or Mom about seeing this man because they would tell me to stop prying into other folks' business, but I did tell Charley McCall at the newspaper store, the man I deliver papers for.

"That there's Jerry Kreshmer, be my guess," Charley said. "Works for one of them wildcat oil drillers. Always off in places like Mexico or Venezuela. They say Mrs. Kreshmer comes to stay at the old Kreshmer place because the places Jerry gets sent to on a job ain't healthy. Somebody told me that Mrs. Kreshmer—she's got a stylish first name, Larue—said that the natives of the places where Jerry goes to drill would be a lot more friendly than the natives of this town."

"Well, Charley, that can't be true," I said. "Joe Harney and she must be pretty friendly because I see his truck out there."

"Yes, I guess they must be," he said, staring out the window with a funny look on his face. "They must be real friendly. Look, Rich, why don't you pick up your papers and git."

I only saw Mrs. Larue Kreshmer up close but the one time. I was picking up my papers at Charley's when she came in and bought cigarettes. Charley said later that anybody coming in that early

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must have been out all night. Anyway, Mrs. Kreshmer was dressed pretty stylish, I guess, because she had a big hat that slanted down across her face, and high heels, and wore stockings that looked like they were made from fishnets. Her voice was low and gravelly, as if maybe she smoked too much, but Charley must have liked her because he was all smiley and oily when usually he's as crusty as skim ice. His eyes followed her out and he stood looking at the door after she had gone.

"I gonnies!" he said, but he wasn't talking to me. "I gonnies! I always heard that Jerry Kreshmer was a tough nut. But I'll match that one against him any day."

The ripples had hardly died away from where Jerry Kreshmer had dumped Joe Harney's body into the pond before I took off through the brush to the Ridge Road and headed for home to tell what I had seen. As I ran along the road, the same big Packard touring that I had seen in the Kreshmers' parking space earlier that summer passed me, going at a pretty good clip and slipping from one side of the road to the other and raising clouds of dust. There was a woman sitting in the front seat with Jerry Kreshmer, and the back seat was piled with clothes like maybe they didn't have time to pack.

When I got home I was so excited I had to sit on the porch swing for a little, with Dad sitting in a rocker and waiting for me to tell him what was the matter. As soon as he got my story, we both hurried over to Tommy Lewis' house to tell him.

Mr. Lewis is the Chief of Police although we don't have but four policemen in the whole town. After I answered all their questions, he and Dad and Johnny Herring, another policeman, headed out to Quarry Pond. I wanted to go along but Dad thought I shouldn't. I don't know what I could have seen that would have been worse than what I had already seen.

Joe Harney's murder was the biggest thing that had happened in our town since Armistice Day. He owned the biggest grocery in town and everybody knew him. He always wore a stiff, detachable collar and a black tie in which he sported a pearl stickpin that must have cost five dollars easy. He used pinkish sleeve garters to keep his sleeves pulled up so his starched cuffs wouldn't get dirty. Over his vest, when he was in the store, he wore a white apron, clean and fresh because he changed it twice a day, so that with his big smile, his fresh-colored cheeks, and his hair just beginning to get gray, he looked like the friendly family grocer in the billboard advertisements for bread.

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Except he wasn't. For one thing, most of Joe's customers thought he cheated them. That was because whenever his regular customers bought something and charged it, Joe would write it down in their book. The trouble was nobody could read Joe's writing, so they couldn't be sure what things they had bought, especially after a couple of weeks had passed. The thing that made people certain that Joe cheated them was that he never argued with them. He just scratched the item off their book.

Some said he got even by adding it back the next month anyway. But whether or not he cheated them, people said he did, and in our town it didn't take long for what people were saying to be believed, especially if it was something that didn't make a person look good. So a lot of people disliked and distrusted Joe Harney. But nobody would have murdered him. But somebody did, because the reports said he had been shot through the chest with a rifle.

There was another thing about Joe Harney. I don't know if anybody else knew about this, but I did because I saw it. One day I came in the back door of the store, not making any noise because I had just gotten a new pair of sneakers for the summer. I heard a quiet scuffle and I saw Joe Harney reaching over the counter and grabbing Hilda Powell and rubbing his hand up and down the front of her dress and trying to kiss her.

Hilda was an older girl, maybe sixteen, and she broke away from him without too much trouble. She picked up a can of peaches and was about to throw it, her face all shocked and angry and disgusted, but she dropped the can and ran out of the store crying.

"I wouldn't say anything, Rich," Joe said when he saw me at the back of the store. "Hilda's a pretty girl, and you know how us he-men are about pretty girls."

I didn't know much about any girls, pretty or not, but I would have died before I would admit it. But I knew there was something disgusting about an old man like Joe—he must have been forty-five or fifty if he was a day—reaching over and messing with a young girl like Hilda Powell. Joe asked me if I would like a candy bar, free, but I said I wasn't hungry.

Also I wouldn't want to be in Joe Harney's shoes if Hilda's father, Bryan Powell, ever heard about it. Newt Harris, who worked in the Bon Ton Shoe Store, made some kind of remark to Hilda once when she was trying on shoes. Nothing happened for maybe a month or so and then one Saturday evening when the store was full of customers, Mr. Powell walked in and without saying a word picked

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Newt up and threw him through the show window. He walked out, still not saying anything. Folks said Newt looked awful silly, his mouth an O, his body stiff like a store-window dummy, when Mr. Powell picked him up.

If people were shocked by Joe's murder, they seemed to bear up pretty well. But everybody was sorry for Mrs. Harney. Florence Harney was short, round, and bouncy, with brown eyes that stuck out a little, and cheeks that looked as though she had something tucked away on each side. Her face was flushed like she had just come from peering into a hot oven, giving her a rosy, shiny look, something like a ripe cherry. She wore her hair in a crown with a bun on top like a tam-o'-shanter.

Her hair in the back was pulled up straight from her neck and held by a curved, brownish comb which had an edge set with a row of sparkling little jewels, ten of them. The reason I know is that Mrs. Harney sat in front of us in church and I had counted those ten jewels maybe a million times. They reminded me of something that would be in that story about Tarzan and the gold of Ophir, a book I read five times. I heard Mom say that Florence Harney's hair style, like the songs she played on the piano, was twenty years out of date.

From her looks you would have expected Mrs. Harney to be laughing and jolly, but she wasn't. She almost never spoke and when she did it seemed as if she wasn't interested in what she was saying or in what you were going to answer. When she looked at you it was as if she was seeing and remembering somebody else. I overheard Dad say to Mom that Florence Harney reminded him of somebody who had done time. Mom said something like well, she hadn't been herself since little Anne died of the infantile, and anyway living with Joe Harney and working six days a week in the store couldn't have been much different from jail.

Us neighborhood kids used to gather on the front steps of Harney's store at night and horse around. The Harney house was attached to the store and there were nights when you could hear Mrs. Harney playing the piano, mostly hymns, and songs that came, I guess, from the time she was young. I remember one night when the playing stopped in a jumble of notes right in the middle of a piece, and I heard Mrs. Harney crying oh, oh, oh, over and over again, as if there was no way for her to say how sad and lonely she was now that Joe was gone. It made me feel bad and when I told Dad about it he said

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everybody felt sorry for her but what could anybody do, that the only person who could ever have helped her was Joe Harney himself.

It must have been more than a month later when Chief of Police Lewis stopped by our front porch one evening on his way home from the police station and sat for a spell with Mom and Dad. I heard him say that there hadn't been any trace of the Kreshmers and that they were probably in Mexico or Venezuela by this time. Mom said she hoped that the Kreshmer woman would find those friendly natives, seeing she made those catty remarks about the rest of us. Mom asked Mr. Lewis if he had heard how Bryan Powell was doing. Mr. Lewis said he was expected out of the hospital any day now and that he was pretty sick of it after six weeks.

That settled something I had been thinking about. It didn't seem likely that Hilda Powell's father had put a bullet through Joe Harney if he had been in the hospital at the time. Had his leg heisted up in one of them pulley rigs, Mr. Lewis said. And that gave me another thought. Maybe Hilda Powell had something to do with it. She was on the rifle team in high school. But I didn't believe it because Hilda was kind of sweet and gentle and wouldn't be likely to go lying out in the brush somewhere, waiting to get a clear shot at Joe Harney.

Mom and Dad and Mr. Lewis was sitting there, talking about this and that, mostly about other people in town, when Johnny Herring, who had the night duty at the police station, came hurrying up and handed Mr. Lewis a letter.

"It's from Jerry Kreshmer," Johnny said. "From some place in Mexico. It came in on the eight o'clock, and Andy Smith at the post office brought it right over, saying it wasn't something he had to do because the post office is closed."

"Big of Andy," Mr. Lewis said. "Let's see what it says."

He edged his rocker over to where the light was coming out the front window from the lamp in the living room, and read out loud.

"Dear Tommy:

"I hear from this one and that one you are looking to ask did I shoot that old rat Joe Harney. Well, I didn't but somebody did and I don't see no great loss. What happened was this. I had drove almost 1400 miles up from the Gulf, with only about five hours of sleep. I parked past our lane down the Ridge Road a piece because I wanted to surprise Larue. She didn't expect me home for another two weeks.

"It was about sunup when I walked into our lane and I was the one who got the surprise. Joe Harney's body is lying there on the

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gravel next to his truck. Right away I figured Larue must have done it, so I picked Joe up and carried him down to the pond and dropped him in. Then I went up the lane to have it out with Larue but she said she hadn't seen Joe Harney in a week and that we better get out of there because everybody would think we done it because of her friendship with Joe.

"I told Larue okay, just this one last time I was going to help her but that she had to stop playing around. She said she'd stop when I did. Anyway we took off right then. The next time I come home if I do I might answer your questions. Again I might not. You ain't got no way to tie me to the shooting. You can't prove nothing. Remember me to the boys at McCann's poolroom, them that ain't in jail yet.

J. Kreshmer"

Nobody said anything for a little while, then Dad said,

"I don't think they did it. If they did, they wouldn't be foolish enough to write to you. I think Jerry knows he's home-free and he's just showing off, trying to make it harder for you."

They all talked about it a lot, but I noticed Mom didn't have as much to say as the men did. They were still at it when they chased me off to bed, so I didn't get to hear what Mr. Lewis was going to do next.

Whatever it was, the murder of Joe Harney was never solved. September came and school opened, so I didn't have time for both birdwatching and my paper route. One day Dad asked me if I had dismantled my bird blind. I said no, why should I? He said it was always a good idea when you used any place in the woods to put it back the way you found it and I had better get myself out there and do it.

So on Saturday morning I went out to Quarry Pond and pulled down the pine branches and scattered them around and shook out the rug and brought it home. It was pretty soggy and Mom made me hang it out on the line to get dry.

Mrs. Harney kept on at the store for about a year after Joe's death. But a big grocery chain opened a store a block away and it wasn't long before Mrs. Harney had to close up. Everybody felt bad about it but that didn't prevent them from buying at the new chain store.

They felt bad too when Mrs. Harney's body was found in the storeroom behind the store with an open can of rat poison beside her.

I suppose I should have felt sorry about Mrs. Harney killing her-

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self, but I didn't. I thought maybe she was better off now, that there were things she wouldn't have to think about any more. What I mean is that on that Saturday morning a year ago when I tore my bird blind down and shook out the rug, I caught a quick sparkle of something flying out of the rug, flashing in the sun and disappearing in the reeds and ooze at the edge of the pond.

The next morning, Sunday, I sat behind Mrs. Harney in church and when I counted the jewels in her comb, instead of ten, there were nine. But like Jerry Kreshmer said in his letter, you can't prove nothing.

NEXT ISSUE . . .

11 *NEW* stories, including—

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Captain Leopold)

JACK RITCHIE (about the orange man)

JOYCE PORTER (about Inspector Dover)

HENRY SLESAR (about the Contessa Collection)

PATRICIA MOYES (about whispering in the reeds)

H. R. F. KEATING (about Miss Unwin goes a-hunting)

and a distinguished reprint by

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

F. B. Roome's first story—"Swann's Song"—appeared in the September 9, 1981 issue of EQMM. His second story cuts closer to the bone—a tough, moving, provocative story about one of the grimmest aspects of life in a maximum-security prison . . .

DEAD MAN'S WALK

by F. B. ROOME

McKenna had worked the dead man's walk on "C" Block forever—at least, it seemed that long. He didn't appear to mind a job that everyone else, including me, hated—which is why we all thought he was a little odd. One of the reasons, anyway.

The dead man's walk was just that. Ten cells set aside to handle the lucky lads who were waiting for the big booby prize the state had awarded them. They weren't too happy about being there and sometimes showed their displeasure in cute little ways like dumping a cup of whatever on you as you moved down the run. They had time and they had imagination.

That wasn't the real problem though. Most of them settled down if you treated them decently and if they didn't, you had a few ways to calm them down. Even the dead men still have things left to lose—mail, store orders. There were a lot of little levers.

The big problem was that they were around a long time. A *long* time. Any half-baked shyster could keep the appeal process going for years. As the months passed, you started to forget why they were there. You forgot the rap sheet in the packet that had turned your stomach when you read it. The press coverage died and you were left in McKenna's country, guarding a piece of society's forgotten flotsam until it was his turn to ride the garbage wagon. Except he turned into a person if you weren't careful. Real careful.

That made it bad because in our state the floor man on dead man's walk went all the way with each of his boys. Down the steps, out

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the door, across the yard, into the shed, and up the scaffold. You counted each step going up, found there were exactly 13, and you suddenly knew for the first time how that number really got unlucky. Then you came back alone in about 30 minutes that seemed an eternity—and I guess they were for the guest of honor. Afterward you got sick, got drunk, got sad—whatever suited you. But you didn't get over it. McKenna could hack it, but not me. I found that out quick.

When my unemployment insurance had run out and Charlie Whittaker, assembly line inspector (me), still wasn't on anybody's want list, I'd taken the next step down the ladder and become a prison guard—pardon me, a corrections officer. They dropped me right into dead man's walk while McKenna was having his gut-cut on in the hospital.

I made one trip and packed it in. It wasn't too bad until that night—we always do it at night now. It helps us try to hide.

My boy was a 56-year-old Czech who had capped 30 years in a foundry with a hot night's work around the house that left pieces of his entire family stacked in the bathtub. In the time he had spent on dead man's walk he had painted a mural of Miami Beach that covered his entire cell, read the collected works of Louis L'Amour, taught me 16 Czech cuss words, and given up trying to understand what the hell had happened. He was a pretty tough bird and I thought he could make it, which meant I could too. I was wrong on both counts. We had to drag him the last 20 yards and carry him up the steps.

I demanded a transfer the next day and got it because they were too short-handed to fire me. Most guards on dead man's walk lasted a little longer than I did, some couldn't make it that far, but no one liked the duty and everybody bailed out as soon as they could. Except McKenna.

He stayed on, handling it all, calm, cool, considerate, an undertaker of the old school preparing his customers with care. What was really strange was that it seemed to rub off. His boys never broke down, never caused a scene—at least, that was the word.

I didn't think too much about it until I was stuck as the yard-gate man on one of McKenna's business nights. I saw them coming in the dusky light, but I didn't catch on until I saw the harness the dude was wearing. You should be able to spot a dead man on his last trip a mile off, but not this dude. That was what had thrown me.

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The guy was nervous, sure, but there was a cocky spring in his step that I couldn't figure. As McKenna led him past, the guy even turned to me and said, "Good evening, officer. Nice day, isn't it?" And then he winked at me. He winked at me! McKenna just nodded and strolled by like he was on his way to get a ham sandwich at the mess hall.

"Evening, Charlie. Hold the gate, will you? We'll be back in about forty minutes, or I will, anyway."

Well, that seemed about the coldest crack I'd ever heard, but the little guy in the harness just laughed, and I mean a real hearty laugh. It was weird.

I puzzled over it for the better part of an hour, so much so that I didn't even realize it was all over until I saw McKenna coming back through the darkness. There wasn't quite as much bounce in his step, but his craggy face was still as serene as ever.

"How did it go, McKenna?" I didn't want to ask that, but I couldn't help it.

"Nice and easy. No scene. No sweat. He was pretty relaxed, so it was a clean break . . . You know, Charlie, not many ask. Hell, not many give a damn! I wish you'd stayed on dead man's walk so that once in a while . . ." His voice trailed away as he looked at something only he could see. I wondered for the first time just how old he was and how long he'd been at it.

"Not me, I can't hack it, Mac. I haven't got the heart for it."

"Charlie, you've got the heart for it, maybe a little too much. That's why I need you. Let me buy you a drink sometime and we'll talk it over."

The moon was full in the sky now and we watched a small dog-shaped cloud slide over it.

"Mac, I'll take a free drink anytime I can get it, but I'm not going back to dead man's walk. I can't." The cloud drifted on across and McKenna moved through the gate.

"We'll see, Charlie, we'll see. You know I need you—I can't last forever. Everybody wears out, even me." He began walking away without looking back.

"How the hell do you do it, Mac? How do you get them to go so easy?"

"I tell them a bedtime story. See you later, Charlie." He still didn't look back as his figure faded in the darkness.

We were deterring the hell out of crime that year. We deterred a 22-year-old junkie who never did remember the night that brought

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him low. We deterred a bank teller who caught the branch manager auditing his wife. We deterred an old pro who couldn't believe that a college kid in a corner grocery would put his life on the line for $68 bucks of someone else's money. We deterred a Dallas Cowboy fan who brought his shotgun back to a bar to end a discussion on quarterbacks. Nobody remembers their names now, or the fact that they were executed, but I remember their faces as McKenna walked each one through the gate.

They were almost dead ringers for the first guy and in the same weird way. I mean, I'd seen as much fear in kids on their way to the principal's office. They all went easy, a lot easier than I would have gone. The only change I could see was in McKenna.

It wasn't much. He just seemed a little bit older and a little bit heavier each trip, but it was all inside weight. When the clock ran out for the Cowboy fan on a Monday night in November—just after Howard Cosell had screamed the Cowboys to a comeback win—McKenna came back moving slow.

I looked at him closely, "Did it go okay, Mac?"

"It went okay . . . No sweat, same as always. I'm just getting a little old." He sat down heavily on the first row of bleachers that ran almost up to the gate. "How about that drink you never got around to?" Without waiting for a reply, McKenna pulled a half pint of Jack Black from his back pocket, took a healthy belt, and handed it over to me.

I took it out of reflex, surprised as hell. I mean, there were more than a couple of officers who would sneak a nip or two on duty, but I never figured McKenna to be one of them. I took a short hit just so I could hand it back.

"Mac, you know if the wrong supervisor comes by on some half-baked snap inspection, we're both goners."

"At this time of night it isn't likely, and as short-handed as they are now, they'd look the other way if we were smuggling in a truckload of hookers. Though a couple would ask for their share." He took another long drink from the bottle and passed it back to me.

This time I took a real long pull, as much as I could hold, figuring his next drink would kill it and put it out of sight. I was right. We let the artificial fire warm our night-chilled bodies as we looked up silently at an empty sky.

"This isn't your style, Mac."

"I just need a little extra energy to get me through these days. It gets a little harder each time."

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"Why, you slide them out as easy as pie."

"I damned well do, but . . . it costs a little more than I realized."

We sat quietly for what seemed a long time.

"Mac, are you ready to tell me that bedtime story?"

"Will you come back to the walk?"

"Don't count on it."

"Charlie, I think you will. And I've got no choice—I've got to tell someone, got to find someone to take the damned job over."

"So what's the story?" I was wishing he had another half pint.

"I started out pretty much the same way you did. I was flat broke and it was work here or starve. So I didn't complain, not even when they stuck me on dead man's walk. I treated them all pretty reasonable, didn't take any guff, but I didn't dish any out either. I got to know the people pretty well as time passed . . . too well. My first trip to the shed went even worse than I hear yours did.

"He was a 54-year-old fruitcake who poisoned his pal and the young jock who was the third side of the triangle. He liked Fred Astaire movies, Mexican cooking, and chess.

"He was all right until I put the damned harness on him. There's something about that thing that takes it out of the toughest. He threw up, began crying uncontrollably, and I hadn't even gotten him out of the cell yet."

One of us slowly cleared his throat. I think it was McKenna.

"I tell you one thing, Charlie, no man should have to die like that, not like an animal without dignity. I have walked some to the shed that I sure wasn't sorry to see go because they weren't ever going to bring anybody anything but grief. They just didn't have it in them not to hurt people, but even they were entitled to die like men.

"Well, anyway I dragged him through the paces, but he didn't even die legal. He had fainted for the second time just after we got the rope around him and they were going to slap him awake so he wouldn't miss that last thrill, so he could go out with nice open, bulging eyes the way the state wanted. I went off my head, punched the captain in the jaw, and dropped the damned trap myself. Old Herman was still swinging when I went out the door.

"I got drunk and called in sick two days running, figuring I'd give them time to decide whether they wanted to prefer charges or just fire me. They didn't, of course. The more things change, the more they stay the same. They were just as short-handed then as they are now, so Captain Ryker came by my room on the second day to tell me that there would be no reprisals—as long as I was back at

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work tomorrow. The old creep got his pound of flesh. I wound up right back on dead man's walk eating my heart out."

McKenna lit a cigarette, his shaking hands making the connection on the third try.

"I couldn't face going through it again, not that way. I had six months to think of something and the best I could come up with was the bedtime story."

"Wait a minute, Mac. You mean that bit about a bedtime story was true?"

"Oh, yeah, Charlie. True. It's all in the bedtime story. There are a few variations, depending on their situation and how bright they are, but I send each of those poor guys hoping all the way to Hell, believing in an out-and-out lie."

We sat and shivered quietly for a moment, each of us alone.

"Well, are you going to tell me, or do we play guessing games?"

"It shouldn't take you long to guess, Charlie. It's real simple. I tell them they are not going to die. I tell them the fix is in."

We stared at each other blankly, looking for belief, denial, some sort of punchline to the joke.

"I tell them that me and the Doc and the duty captain have been paid off, paid by the family, or whoever, anybody that would be believable to them. Hell, I could tell them it was Santa Claus and they would believe it because they want to believe. They want to believe *bad*.

"So when I tell them there will be a small back hook on the rope that will be snapped into the harness, they believe it. They believe they'll really be spirited off to Brazil to write their life story. What else have they got to believe in—a trip to the big rock candy mountain on golden wings?

"It works. It always has. Except once, one guy caught on right at the last. Goody Buckeye, his name was, politest murderer you ever met. I can still hear his little high-pitched voice trying to scream through the hood, *"McKENNA, YOU MOTH . . ."* That was as far as he got. I don't think he meant to call me a moth, but he ran out of time.

"Now I'm running out of time too. I walk them through real easy, but there's a catch. They all walk back with me. Every man, every name, every face, every twitch, is right here with me. They're all hanging from my shoulders and they're getting heavy . . . or I'm getting old . . . Probably it's a little of both with a dash of Jack Black to help me ramble."

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"Mac, it's good to talk once in a while. Hell, I wish you had another half pint, then maybe I could unwind a little myself." I wasn't sure what was coming, but I was afraid of it.

"You're going to have to take over for me before too long." There was no doubt in McKenna's voice.

"I don't think I could do it and I sure don't want to, Mac."

"You can and you will. I'm not asking now, Charlie. You care too much to let them go hard. It will be you or that damn Wheeler who will lead them to death and laugh all the way back. The worst of them deserves better than that."

"It's not right to fool a man the way you do, to deny him a chance to make his peace—"

"It's me that gives him a little extra peace! He's already made all the peace he's going to make and right doesn't have a damned thing to do with *any* of it."

"But I couldn't feed them a line of bull like your Bedtime Story, not with a straight face."

"When the time comes you'll find it's easy. They'll help you tell it. They *want* to hear it and you'll tell it to them."

McKenna walked away quickly then as though something had been settled even though I hadn't agreed to a thing and had no intention of agreeing. I would have said something as he went, but I couldn't think of anything that mattered.

Things went along as normally as they ever do inside a maximum-security prison for about two months. Then, one week before McKenna was scheduled to make his next trip with a Local Imitation Hell's Angel, he dropped the trap on me and on himself.

The outside rover found McKenna during the afternoon check. Mac was swinging gently in the warm breeze that came through the shed's open door. He had put on the hood, jury-rigged the harness, and run a wire to the trap release. He did it all himself and there was no one there to tell him a bedtime story.

Me, I wound up getting stuck with the job, just like McKenna figured—he'd already recommended me as a replacement. I wouldn't say yes, but I couldn't say no and mean it. I take the Local Imitation Hell's Angel for his initiation into the original chapter tomorrow night.

I don't know yet if I will have a bedtime story for him when the time comes. Probably, but I'm already more worried about somebody having one for me when I need it.

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a *NEW* short story by

GEORGE BAXT

Alma Horgan was a lonely, wealthy widow, striking in appearance and charming in manner. But like the moon, Alma had her dark side . . .

PLAY LOVER FOR ME

by GEORGE BAXT

"Please play *Lover* for me. It's one of my favorites. I adore it." Irvin Gaylord would always remember her mellifluous, honeyed voice. When Alma Horgan first began patronizing the piano bar where Irvin was the keeper of the keyboard, Irvin admired the middle-aged beauty who he once described to a friend as "somewhere between the age of fifty and death." Alma was tall and stately and carried herself like royalty. While her face wasn't conventionally beautiful, she nevertheless had learned to command attention and admiration. She was a good listener, a charming companion.

Irvin's piano was built into a large piano-shaped bar and whenever Alma appeared, which was at least two or three nights a week, the seat at Irvin's left was always vacated for her. The bartender then promptly served her with a Sazerac which had been her late husband's favorite drink. Now, almost two years after his death, Alma wasn't quite sure if she forgave Herbert Horgan for succumbing to a fatal heart attack the night before the day of their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Herbert left her inconsolable, lonely, and a considerable amount of wealth.

But in Beverly Hills (perhaps one should emphasize especially in Beverly Hills) a single woman reluctantly plodding through the middle ages was considered a redundancy, a frozen asset. She was fine fodder for a last-minute replacement at a dinner party, but

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otherwise it was up to Alma to make and pay for the social gestures. After a protracted period of mourning (during which she finally got around to reading Proust), Alma suddenly surfaced in the land of the living, taking tennis lessons, golf lessons, and even yielding to the fine art of needlepoint.

When Alma was eventually adopted by a group of Hollywood's perennial bachelors (types Irvin insisted were bred purely for the comfort of middle-aged widows and spinsters), she was introduced by one of them to Fingers, which is the name of the bar where Irvin reigns at the piano. After a few months of steady patronage, Alma appropriated the bar and the pianist as her "own."

Irvin became a frequent guest for luncheon at Alma's beautiful home (complete with Olympic-sized swimming pool, tennis court, projection room, and three ovens in the kitchen). He almost got to know her quite well. He soon realized that like the moon, Alma had her dark side. The explorer who might have penetrated that nether region had yet to materialize. Even the late Herbert jocosely referred to Alma as "my mysterious beauty." Men had found the mystery tantalizing, women dismissed it as stupid.

They were all wrong.

One Sunday Alma and Irvin were seated by the pool staring out at the valley. Alma seemed enclosed by a brown study.

"A penny for them," said Irvin.

Alma smiled her strange Mona Lisa smile. "You can have it free of charge. I was thinking of Herbert and the Sundays we would spend exploring the hills of Malibu."

Irvin shifted and pointed his mouth straight at Alma. "Listen, Alma, I think we know each other long enough not to apologize for leveling. You need a man." The laugh with which she favored him was somewhere between a tinkle and a croak, and then she softly stroked her throat which unlike those of most of her contemporaries, was not wrinkled like crepe paper. Irvin was warming to his subject. "A man, a real honest-to-God man, not those clones you drag around with."

"Irvin darling, real men aren't interested in me. I'm a back number, a lost cause."

"You're a very handsome lady and you steal the spotlight every time you come slinking into the bar."

"I don't slink."

"Well, whatever you do, it's very seductive. I mean those things

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you trot around with and meaning no disrespect, my dear, because you know I have come to love and respect you as I would my own . . ."

"Say it."

". . . mother . . . sorry."

Alma roared with laughter. "I'm not really old enough to be your mother, am I?"

"Nobody is. Anyway, there are a lot of guys who come into the bar who have asked me if you're available—"

"They're after my money," she interjected sharply.

"So what's wrong with that? How often have you told me you have so much you couldn't possibly spend it in one lifetime!"

"Oh, it isn't the money itself. It's the unsubtle greed of some of those jackals. Oh, don't think I haven't dated one or two so-called prospects. There was one in Palm Springs and another in New York and let's not forget that maybe count in Paris who every time he got out of the bathtub, he left an oil slick." She stared forlornly back at the scenery and then said in almost a whisper, "I'll never know the kind of lover and husband and well . . . friend . . . like my Herbert."

She turned to Irvin. "That's really what he was. My very best friend. You know, after a while we didn't even notice or discuss the fact that we were childless. I missed having a baby at first, but then later on I decided that if it's meant to be, it'll happen. After five or six years it didn't matter any more. We both saw doctors and there was nothing wrong with either one of us physically. We just weren't earmarked for parenthood."

"Have you any relatives at all?"

"Oh, yes, back east. Too many. I have a sister and a brother and nieces and nephews who periodically phone or write to inquire after my health." She thought for a moment and then said, "I think I'll leave all my money to you."

"Please don't!" He seemed on the verge of panic. "I really mean that. Please don't leave me a damned thing except pleasant memories. I wouldn't know what to do with money and if I had money I'd quit my job and if I quit my job I'd have nowhere to go nights and then I'd fade away and die. No, thank you. If you won't leave your money to your relatives, leave it to the Seeing Eye."

Alma was laughing heartily again, yet somehow Irvin didn't believe she was really amused. He had the feeling that the spurning of her offer of largess (whether she was serious or not didn't matter) was another rejection she was not prepared or trained to cope with.

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He remembered Alma once saying to him, "As a young girl, my mother used to tell me to learn how to live. What we really should be taught is to learn how to die. When Herbert died, I died with him. He went so suddenly, so swiftly." She had underlined her words by snapping her fingers. "I wasn't prepared for it. Can you beat that? One day short of our twenty-fifth anniversary."

Irvin cleared his throat. This had been one of her longest silences and it was time for him to leave. "Alma?"

"What?"

"Are you coming into the club tonight?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. I'll see how I feel later. Why?"

"There's an old friend of mine from Boston in town and he's coming into the club tonight."

"And you think he just might go for me." Her voice was flat and monotonous, as though it had been sandpapered of all emotion.

"He thinks you're a knockout."

Alma stared at him with a quizzical expression. "When did he see me?"

"Friday night. Don't you remember him at all?"

Alma looked perplexed. "Did you introduce us? I absolutely don't remember what he looks like if you introduced us."

"No, no, I didn't introduce you. He was going out when you were coming in. You sort of sideswiped each other like ships that pass in the night."

Alma groaned. "You've been reading gothic romances."

Irvin persisted. "You must have caught a good look at him. He was in your way and sort of hopped out of it when you came plowing towards me."

"Oh, God, is that how I seem when I make my entrance? Like a steamroller?"

"No, darling. Like a magnificent ocean liner coming into its berth."

Alma was trying to remember her entrance on Friday night. "Let me think. I remember waving at you and at the bartender and at some of the others and then—oh, yes, he said something like 'Oops, sorry.' "

"That was Nick."

"Nick what?"

"Nick Lombard."

"How long have you known him?"

"We were at college together. I was going to be the great composer and he was going to be the great writer."

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"I know what happened to you. What happened to him?"

"He married a rich girl."

"And that was the end of his writing ambition?"

"She convinced him to go into her father's business. He was very much in love with her until the divorce."

"And now he's on the prowl."

"Well, yes, he's on the prowl, but there were three other wives after Gladys."

"Gladys?"

"The first one. The rich one. She lasted six years. The divorce was—oh, let me think . . ." He stared at the smog expecting to find a number written there. ". . . about fifteen years ago."

"Married four times and now you're wishing him on *me*?"

"I'm not wishing you on anybody. Nick just happened to ask if I knew you and I happen to know you, so I told him I know you and he said she's one hell of a great-looking broad—"

"Broad?" said Alma with a sniff.

"Nick's a diamond in the rough. Anyway, he's six feet tall, has a face 'that makes the angels wanna grow,' is in fantastic condition for a man in his fifties and he says he's very tired of the young scene. He wants to meet someone who's heard of George Gershwin and Cole Porter." Irvin leaned toward her conspiratorially. "Come on in tonight. Live dangerously. I'll play *Lover* for you in three-quarter time. I've got a new arrangement."

"You seem to be chockful of new arrangements."

That night Alma dressed with more than usual care. She did everything she could to deglamorize herself. She wore a simple black skirt with a simple yellow blouse. To the blouse she pinned a very modest clip. Around her neck she wore a single strand of small pearls. She wore an old black jacket that was almost but not quite frayed at the cuffs, and her final touch was a black beret she had purchased in Paris a year earlier. Once it was arranged on her head, it gave her the look of an insouciant, slightly over-the-hill gamin.

The look, for some incredible reason (as far as Alma was concerned), appealed to Nick Lombard when Irvin formally introduced them. Irvin forgave them when Nick suggested they retire to a secluded booth rather than be hemmed in by the group of regular patrons at the bar.

Once seated in the booth with their drinks placed on the table, Alma smiled at the incredibly good-looking Nick as in the back-

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ground she could hear *Lover* played in three-quarter time. She hummed along with the tune.

"That's very pretty," said Nick, his voice a matinee-idol baritone.

"He's playing it especially for me. It's a new arrangement."

Softly Nick sang the lyrics. Alma was somewhat surprised. He smiled and said, "Your favorite song happens to be my favorite song."

"Well, what a coincidence," said Alma.

"You don't believe me."

Alma raised her Sazerac to her lips, sipped, and then said, "No, I really don't believe you. But it was a charming gesture."

"Irvin tipped me off."

"As I suspected."

"How come no flash tonight?"

"Flash?"

"When you swept in here Friday night, it was like a convention of kleig lights. Tonight you're like Edith Piaf. Look, do we have to stay here? There's a terrific new disco out in Venice."

Alma shook her head slowly from side to side. "Not for me. Besides, disco is a young scene. Irvin told me you were very tired of the young scene."

"I'm tired of the young scene but I'm not tired of dancing. I once wanted to be a professional dancer."

"I seem to remember Irvin telling me you wanted to be a writer."

"A dancing writer." They fell into laughter together easily. And just as easily they enjoyed dancing together, and dining together, and when, about five or six weeks later (Alma was at first impressed that Nick didn't try to rush her and then began to worry he didn't find her physically attractive) they finally shared her bedroom, Alma almost forgot she was once married to a man named Herbert Horgan.

Now in the constant company of the dashing Nick Lombard, Alma acquired a new and not unwelcome glamor. They were a handsome couple and it was a foregone conclusion in certain circles that they would eventually marry. Nick never let her spend a penny other than for the occasional gift she gave him. "I'm the man around here," he constantly reminded her, though she didn't need reminding. He was a man and she was a most appreciative woman and soon she knew she was hopelessly in love with him.

Their names were coupled in gossip columns that reached from Los Angeles to New York to London and the continent beyond. Alma

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took on the strange but appealing glow of recycled youth, and she and Nick played golf and tennis and swam and jogged and made passionate love and entertained lavishly at her mansion. Back east, Alma's family fretted at visions of the inheritance that was about to slip through their fingers.

One evening as they were enjoying cocktails on her terrace, Alma asked Nick, "Which of your wives was Celia?"

Nick's eyes ominously narrowed into slits for a few seconds but then widened into boyish astonishment before Alma could discern whether or not he was annoyed or disturbed. "I think I told you. She was number three."

"You probably did tell me but I didn't memorize the pecking order. Anyway, she has sent me a very nasty letter warning me not to marry you."

"I haven't proposed."

"I know, that's why I find Celia's letter more amusing than disturbing."

"Will you marry me?"

"Certainly. The sooner the better." He crossed to her, lifted her from her seat, took her into his arms, kissed her lovingly, and then said, "Celia's an alcoholic."

"Ah. That explains the stains on the paper."

"I mean a besotted alcoholic. No letter from Effie?"

"Which one was Effie?"

"The most recent. She's into voodoo."

"Oh, my!"

"It's more or less why I left her. I got bored waking up in the morning and finding a dead canary on my chest. Anyway, I think she finally went to the West Indies to live."

"Were all your wives wealthy?"

"I don't need your money, Alma, you must know that by now."

"What I asked has nothing to do with your needing or not needing my money. I simply want to know if you have a pattern. I know your first wife has a very rich father."

"Had. Died about ten years ago."

"Your second wife . . ." She furrowed her brow. "Did you ever tell me about your second wife?"

"Diana. She was an actress."

"Oh, really. Diana what?"

"Diana Singleton."

"Never heard of her."

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"Neither did anybody else. That's what went wrong with the marriage. I tried to buy her some fame but there was none on the market."

"And Celia, poor besotted Celia. Was she wealthy?"

"Some day she'll be very wealthy. Right now she lives on the alimony I send her and an allowance from her mother who is ninety-three going on forever. By the way, in case she didn't mention it in her letter, I tried to kill her once."

"Twice."

Nick crossed back to the table to get his martini. "I only remember trying to strangle her, and that was on our wedding night."

"As soon as that?"

"She was so drunk. That's when I realized I may have married an alcoholic." He stared into his drink and asked Alma, "I absolutely cannot remember trying to kill her another time."

"She writes she awoke one night in the guest room where you had deposited her in a fit of pique and the bed was in flames."

"Oh, that! She still trying to pin that on me? Celia, my dear Alma, smokes in bed. She set herself on fire."

"Oh, my beautiful Nick. I hope you know that number five is to be the last on your string."

"It better be," whispered Nick, "because, lady, I am bananas over you."

There were over two hundred guests at the wedding and another three hundred at the reception where Irvin was a guest of honor and played *Lover* until a famous Mafia chieftain threatened him with sudden death. The press had a field day, and all over the world middle-aged women were given fresh hope and a renewal of faith in themselves. The paparazzi of the capitals of the world pursued them throughout their three-month honeymoon. A year later, settled in their new home in Bel Air (the Beverly Hills mansion was sold to an Arabian merchant for a price in excess of two million dollars, a negotiation which Nick handled for Alma much to her lawyer's consternation), they still seemed, at least to Irvin who remained a good friend and constant guest, very much in love with each other.

Then it suddenly happened. They were no longer news. There were other names appropriating the cloaks of glamor they once wore. They ceased dropping in at Fingers and soon they dropped Irvin. At first he was annoyed, then he was angry, and then he decided on a devil-may-care attitude and was soon taken up by a whole new other crowd. He missed Alma, however, though he would never admit it.

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And it hurt when the gossip began filtering out of Bel Air that Alma was drinking heavily and accusing Nick of numerous infidelities.

Nick, it seemed, had begun to realize Alma's dark side and complained to Alma's lawyer and a few other business associates that she was given to dark moods and lengthy withdrawals. He admitted to Sam Vaughn, Alma's lawyer, that on at least three occasions she had disappeared for days on end and always returned just as he was about to report her missing to the police.

One night Alma, who had had that one Sazerac too many, said to him, "You're stealing my money. I know it. You're stealing my money. You're forging my name to checks and moving large sums out of the country." For the first time since their marriage he struck her a stunning blow on the cheek.

It was a bright day in June when Nick returned to the house in Bel Air after a long meeting with Sam Vaughn in which he pleaded with Sam to help him have Alma confined to a sanitarium with himself appointed conservator of her estate. Sam had been a witness to Alma's deterioration, but still asked for time before agreeing to the move. Nick couldn't find Alma anywhere. Her car wasn't missing. He checked her room (she had months ago moved into her own room), but it didn't seem as though any of her clothes were missing. He shrugged and phoned his mistress to invite her to dinner.

A little over two weeks later Sam Vaughn phoned Nick. "I'm sorry to take this long making up my mind, Nick. Maybe you're right. Maybe she should be sent into treatment. As for a conservator—"

Nick interrupted him. "She's gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Sam's voice had risen an octave. "You mean she's left you? When did this happen?"

Nick told him how long Alma had been missing. Nick drove to Sam's office at the lawyer's request. Alma's disappearance couldn't be discussed over the phone. Seated across from Sam in his office, Nick replied to a question the lawyer had put to him. "Of course I didn't call the police. She always shows up again."

"But you say nothing is missing. Not her clothes or her luggage."

"I think her jewelry's gone."

"We're calling the police."

Alma and Nick were headline news again. Irvin commented to a friend, "Wherever she is, I hope she knows she's news again." He added, "You know, she told me on several occasions he tried to kill her. One of his ex-wives wrote and warned her that he had tried to kill *her*. Oh, God! Do you suppose I should tell the police?"

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Searching the Bel Air house and the grounds, the police found enough objects to arouse suspicion that there might have been foul play. In the incinerator they found metal snaps from a woman's underclothing and then in a compost heap at the back of the garden they unearthed Alma's reading glasses and a volume of Proust. Sam Vaughn joined the investigation and soon proved that Alma had been right, Nick had been stealing funds through a forged power of attorney. In a rare instance in which neither a body nor a murder weapon was found, Nick Lombard was arrested for the murder of his wife. It was Irvin's testimony and that of his former wives Celia and Effie (who admitted she used voodoo on him but only in self-defense) that condemned Nick Lombard.

Nick vociferously proclaimed his innocence. "Yes, I took some money, only some—but I didn't kill her. I've been framed!"

Nick was sentenced to life imprisonment. Alma's relatives united under one shrewd lawyer to claim her estate, which Sam Vaughn discovered to his chagrin, consisted only of the Bel Air mansion and its furnishings. Her safety-deposit boxes were empty. Her various bank accounts had been transferred to parts unknown. And ironically enough, Nick collapsed in his cell and died two days later.

Irvin at last announced he was leaving Fingers. It came as a shock to the owner, his co-workers, friends, and the bar's patrons. It seems a distant relative had died and left Irvin a quarter of a million dollars and he was going to South America to join an old friend who had been writing tantalizing letters about the gaiety of life in Rio de Janeiro despite the soaring rate of inflation. The friend promised some opportunities for Irvin to make shrewd investments and if he was interested, there was a marvelous location available at the beach for a piano bar.

Several months later Rio's smart set was titillated by a new piano bar called Gaylord. The owner, of course, was Irvin Gaylord who had the room decorated in silver and peacock blue and served such California delicacies as Sloppy Joe's, Tamales with refried beans, and Spinach Quiche à la Alma. Irvin was the talk of Rio although a bit of a mystery as he seemed to favor the company of a rather tired old lady who wore too much jewelry, too much makeup, and a variety of bizarre wigs, and drank nothing but a strange concoction from the south of the United States known as a Sazerac. Not a night passed that one could not hear her Sazerac-soaked voice importuning Irvin:

"Please play *Lover* for me. It's one of my favorites. I adore it."

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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

Mr. Prosper was the bookkeeper-cashier in the offices of Maybury and Goodnight, Solicitors. Since childhood he had been fascinated by numbers—he could add and subtract before he could spell. And now, in his own way, he was a detective of disbursements . . .

AUDITED AND FOUND CORRECT

by ***MICHAEL GILBERT***

At the offices of Messrs. Maybury and Goodnight, Solicitors, the order of departure was an established ritual. It varied only when Mr. Goodnight left early, as he usually did: in the summer for a game of golf or in the winter for a meeting of one of the many societies in which he was interested.

When he was not there, Sal and Beth started at five o'clock packing up their typewriters and tidying their desks. They would be away by a quarter past five, closely followed, and occasionally preceded by young Mr. Manifold, the articled clerk. At five thirty the litigation clerk, Mr. Prince, and the conveyancing clerk, Mr. Dallow, left, though not together since they had not been on speaking terms for two years.

There remained only Sergeant Pike, late of the Royal Marine Corps, who had the job of locking up; and Mr. Prosper, the cashier.

As the girls hurried past on the pavement they could look down

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into the lighted semi-basement room where Mr. Prosper sat at his work. They used to make jokes about him. He was a bachelor who lived by himself, so people said, in a small North London flat.

"Not much to go home to," said Sal. "No wonder he stays late."

"When does he go home, anyway?" said Beth, "I had to come back once for something I'd left behind. It was after seven. He was still at it."

"Perhaps he stays there all night," said Sal.

They had a giggle about this.

"Poor old boy," said Beth. She was the warmer-hearted of the two. "What a life, eh? Adding up and subtracting and that sort of thing all day long."

"He chose it," said Sal. "If he's bloody miserable, it's his own fault, isn't it?" Sal was the cynic.

They were both wrong.

Mr. Prosper was not miserable. He was happy. He had a job which suited him precisely and he would have asked for none other.

Since childhood he had been fascinated by figures. He could add and subtract before he could spell. He liked arranging figures, setting them out in orderly columns, correcting and adjusting them, comparing the totals he arrived at. He compared primes and cube roots as another boy might have compared birds' eggs or stamps.

If his mind had been of a more theoretical bent he might have become a qualified accountant. It was a step he had considered more than once, but rejected. It was the figures themselves which interested him, not the intricacies of taxation and company law which he would have had to master to become an accountant. He was happy to be a bookkeeper and a cashier. That was his métier.

He had joined Messrs. Maybury and Goodnight thirty-five years before, when Alfred Maybury was alive and Richard Goodnight was quite a young man. He had watched over its fortunes from the earliest days, when no one knew where the next week's wages were coming from, until the happy moment when they had acquired Jim Collard as a client. At that time Jim, who was now boss of the Collard Empire of shops and offices, had been at the beginning of *his* career. Richard Goodnight had done a job for him, and done it well. Their company work went, of course, to a large City firm, but all the conveyancing and much of the day-to-day contract work and debt collecting, inseparable from Collard enterprises, came to them.

Mr. Prosper worried about it sometimes. He said to Sergeant Pike,

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who was his only confidant in such matters, "We're a one-man firm with a one-man client."

"Should last out our time," said Pike. "And old Goodnight's."

"He'll take in young Manifold, as soon as he's qualified."

"Don't care for him," said Pike. "Too much grease on his hair."

They neither of them cared for Manifold, who had been to a famous public school, and wore the knowledge of it like a badge in the button hole of his well-cut suit.

"Ought to be in some large outfit," said Pike. "Doesn't fit here."

The smallness of the firm was an added attraction to Mr. Prosper. In a larger organization he would have had assistants. He would have been forced to delegate. Here, he could keep his eye on everything. Once a year a qualified accountant was called in to audit his books, for the satisfaction of the watchdogs at the Law Society. He had an easy task. "I wish they were all like yours," he used to say. "Never a record mislaid or a penny missing."

The early evening was Mr. Prosper's favorite time. His papers, like good children, were all in bed, tucked up in their folders. Perhaps he might have, on the desk in front of him, a single sheet of foolscap ruled in double columns on which he would be making some last-minute calculations, or he might be reconciling the client balances or adjusting the PAYE records. An adjustment and reconciliation which was entirely superfluous. But only part of his mind would be on the job. His real thoughts were running down other tracks.

It was his habit, during such moments of agreeable relaxation, to weigh up his colleagues and acquaintances, their achievements and failures, their gains and losses, just as though they were business enterprises, each with his own personal balance sheet, which he himself was charged with the job of inspecting.

How would Richard Goodnight come out of such an audit?

There were undeniable items on the debit side. He did a minimum of work to justify the profits of the firm which, since Mr. Maybury's death, came into his hands alone. Mr. Prosper knew little about his private life, but was aware that he had a flat near Sloane Square, a house in the country, shares in a shooting syndicate in Kent, and fishing in Scotland. He seemed to change his car every year.

Nor was his day an onerous one. His average time of arrival over the past six months had been 10:27. His average time of departure 4:59. Subtract from this an average lunch hour of one hour and fifty-two minutes, and this left a working day of four hours and forty

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minutes, during which he saw a few old clients and dictated a few letters.

The real work of the firm was done by Mr. Prince and Mr. Dallow.

On the credit side, Mr. Prosper conceded, there were two balancing items. First, the fact that if anything did go really wrong—and the number of things which could go wrong with a one-man solicitor's firm were legion—the disaster would fall on Mr. Goodnight alone. The rest of them would lose their jobs. He would lose all that he possessed. Again, credit had to be given for his share in setting up the firm, his part in the early struggles, and the fact that Jim Collard's work, on which the firm depended, had come through him. Yes, his account was roughly in balance.

At the other end of the scale, take Sergeant Pike. There were substantial, if imponderable assets on the credit side of *his* balance sheet. Twenty years of service in the Marines. The confidence which his record inspired. (Three firms had competed for him when he left the Service.) Excellent health. The financial security of his pension. Yes. A lot of pluses there and very few minuses.

In contrast, what could be said for young Manifold? Too much grease in his hair, Pike had said. Too much grease all round, thought Mr. Prosper. He had been given his articles in the firm, in preference to a number of abler young men, simply because he was Jim Collard's nephew. He did the simplest work, and made mistakes which even the girls laughed at. All he seemed interested in was playing games. Indeed, thought Mr. Prosper, he spent a great deal more time in squash and racquets courts than he did in the law courts; and for these inconsiderable services he was paid rather more than Sergeant Pike and almost as much as Mr. Prosper himself. Moreover it was clear from his conduct and his manner that he already saw himself as future head of the firm.

It was at this point that the well-sharpened pencil in Mr. Prosper's hand checked for a moment, moved on, checked again, and then went back.

The task to which he had been devoting himself that evening was his periodical check of disbursement books. These were records, kept by everyone in the firm, of the petty cash which they expended in the course of their duties: fares, searches, commissioners' fees, and the like. They were operated on a simple in-and-out system. You paid the money out of your own pocket, noted it in your book, and recovered what was owing to you at the end of the week.

The disbursement book in front of him belonged to young Mani-

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fold, and the item at which his pencil had checked was dated September 20th. It said "Collard's. Purchase of shop 220 Holloway Road. Taxis £3.80."

Mr. Prosper climbed stiffly to his feet, went out into the passage, and made his way along to Manifold's room. Papers on the table, papers on the window ledge, papers on the floor.

"No idea of system and order," said Mr. Prosper. It took him some minutes to locate the file he wanted in the bottom drawer of one of the cabinets. He sat down to study it. The solicitors acting for the owners of that particular shop had been Blumfeldts, and it was at their offices, at the far end of Holborn, that the purchase would have been completed.

"Ten minutes' walk, five minutes in a bus," said Mr. Prosper.

The memory which had stopped him was of something he had overheard Sal saying to Beth. "Guess what, I came back in the bus with Prince Andrew last Thursday, and he paid my fare."

Last Thursday had been September 20th and Prince Andrew was the name which the girls had bestowed on young Manifold. It was possible, of course, that the bus trip had been unconnected with the completion of 220 Holloway Road, but in any event £3.80 was an incredible amount for a taxi fare to and from the end of Holborn.

Collard's were always buying and selling small shop and office properties, and after the conveyancing work had been done by Mr. Dallow it would have been normal to finish the routine job of completing the purchase, paying over the money, and collecting the deeds to be entrusted to the articled clerk. There were a dozen files in the cabinet which related to such transactions.

Panting slightly with the exertion, Mr. Prosper gathered them up, and left the room.

In the passage he encountered Sergeant Pike, who said, "Let me carry those for you."

"Quite all right," said Mr. Prosper breathlessly. "I can manage."

It annoyed him that the slightest exertion made him puff and wheeze.

Back in his own room he spread the files on his desk and started to read them. From time to time he referred back from a file to the disbursement book. Now that his suspicions had been aroused it was only too easy to detect the signs of small but systematic cheating that had been going on.

In one case completion had been postponed at the last moment, from Friday in one week until Wednesday in the week following.

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Manifold had claimed taxi expenses for *both* occasions. Then there were the local search fees. Search fees had to be paid, of course, but there seemed to be altogether too many of them. An analysis of the transactions that Manifold had been engaged in over the last six months showed thirteen purchases, eleven sales, and no fewer than *sixty* fees. Mr. Prosper's pencil scurried across a fresh sheet of paper, analyzing, computing, comparing.

Sergeant Pike pushed his head in and said, "I'm off. I'll leave the front door on the latch. Bang it as you go out." He spotted the pile of files and peered at the notes Mr. Prosper was making.

"Has our golden boy been putting his foot in it again?"

"Yes," said Mr. Prosper. "I really think he has."

He was a man who liked to take his time and move slowly. He needed incontrovertible proof.

Next morning he had a word with Sal. He realized that one member of the staff would be unlikely to incriminate another, and he had to proceed with craft.

Fortunately he had found, in the girl's own disbursement book, an item for a single bus fare to the Bank of England dated September 20th, and described, in her school girl writing, as "Documents by hand."

He said to her, "I've been checking these books. Surely you've been undercharging. Why only a single bus fare? Did you walk back?"

Sal thought about it, and said, "No, that's quite right. Thursday afternoon, Mr. Manifold paid my fare. He got on at St. Paul's. We came back together."

"Ah, that accounts for it," said Mr. Prosper, handing her back the book. It did, in fact, account for it. The completion had been that afternoon. Blumfeldt's office was within a stone's throw of St. Paul's.

His next call was on Mr. Dallow, a precise and solemn man with the air of an undertaker. He said, "I've been looking through these disbursement books, and I've been puzzled by all these references to local search fees. Could you explain about that?"

"I usually get the articled clerk to do the local searches. Something wrong with them?"

"Nothing wrong, no. I wondered if you could explain. Just exactly what *are* local search fees? How many do you have to make?"

"That depends. Normally, one Borough Council and one County Council. If you're dealing with a County Borough, of course, you only have to make one search."

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"I see," said Mr. Prosper. He had been wondering whether it would be safe to take Mr. Dallow fully into his confidence. He decided to do so. Mr. Dallow was the soul of discretion.

He pushed the disbursement book across. Mr. Dallow cast an eye down the entries and uttered a series of "tuts" and "tchks" like an electric kettle coming to the boil.

He said, "This is nonsense, absolute nonsense. Purchase of Malpas House. Three search fees! Why, that sale never went through at all. It was canceled before it even started. And what's this? Six separate searches for 3, 5 and 7 Caxton House. They're all flats in the same block, and St. Alban's is a County Borough. One search would have covered the lot. What's the boy playing at?"

"I should hardly describe it as play," said Mr. Prosper coldly.

"And why wasn't it picked up in the bill?"

"It wasn't picked up," said Mr. Prosper, "because they were all Collard's transactions. Instead of sending them a separate bill for each one, as we should do, we debit them quarterly with all their costs for the last three months. I've often pointed out to Mr. Goodnight that this was a slack and dangerous way of doing business and likely to lead to errors."

"Which it has."

"Not errors, Dallow. Systematic fraud."

"We shall have to tell Mr. Goodnight."

"I'd rather you said nothing about it until I've had a word with Manifold. He might have some explanation."

But Mr. Prosper did not say this as though he believed it.

In the luncheon interval he left a note on Manifold's desk, *I would like to see you about your disbursement book. Please look in at 5:30 this evening. J.P.*

"Well," said Manifold. "So what's it all about? I hope it's not going to take too long. I've got a court booked for six o'clock."

He indicated the handle of the squash racquet sticking out of the top of his briefcase. He did not seem at all apprehensive.

"How long it takes depends entirely on you," said Mr. Prosper. He had the offending disbursement book on the desk in front of him, and had marked a dozen places in it with slips of paper. "I'd like an explanation, if there is an explanation, of some of these sums of money you've been claiming."

"What do you mean, explanation? They're my petty cash expenses. Fares and so on."

"Money you've actually spent."

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Manifold looked at him for a long moment, then burst into laughter. It had quite a genuine ring about it. "You've been snooping," he said. He picked up the book and started to look at the entries which Mr. Prosper had marked. Occasionally he chuckled. "Quite a neat bit of detection," he said, "but you've missed one or two. Those commissioners' fees—£4.20. That was a bit of a try on. And a couple of extra taxi fares there."

Mr. Prosper was almost speechless. At last he managed to say, "Do I understand that you admit it?"

"Fiddling the petty cash? Of course I admit it. Everyone does it."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Prosper. "Everyone does *not* do it. Not in a decent, honest, old-fashioned firm like this."

"Old-fashioned is right," said Manifold, looking round Mr. Prosper's basement room, with its wooden cabinets, black deed boxes, and solid furniture. "Dickensian is the word that occurs to me. I think it's time we caught up with the twentieth century."

Mr. Prosper said, picking his words carefully, "Nineteenth, twentieth, or twenty-first century, it makes no difference. Honesty is still honesty, and dishonesty is dishonesty."

"And realism is realism," said Manifold. He had perched himself on the corner of the desk and seemed to have forgotten the urgency of his appointment on the squash court. "Have you ever worked out exactly what the effect of a transaction like that is?" He tapped the disbursement book. "The effect on the client, I mean."

"The effect is, that if he knew about it, he'd realize he was being cheated."

"You're still not thinking about this realistically. Look. Suppose I help myself to £100 in this way. Everything I claim appears as an item in the Collard Company bill. Right?"

Mr. Prosper said nothing.

"It's an expense, and allowable for tax in the accounts of the company. Corporation tax at 52%. Then the profits of the company pay tax and surtax when they come into Uncle Jim's hands. Do you know, he once told me that for every hundred pounds that goes in at the bottom, he can only count on touching ten pounds when it comes out at the top?"

Mr. Prosper still said nothing.

"Work it out for yourself. If I asked Uncle Jim for a hundred pounds—which I'm sure he'd be very happy to give me—it would cost him a thousand quid to raise it. Right? If, on the other hand, I work it this way, it costs him ten pounds, and the Chancellor of

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the Exchequer provides the other ninety, and loses nine hundred into the bargain."

His face white, his mouth compressed to a thin line, Mr. Prosper said, "Fraud is fraud, however you wrap it up."

Manifold got up off the desk. As he did so, Mr. Prosper realized that he was a large and athletic young man, twice as big and twice as strong as he was himself. It also occurred to him that they might be alone in the building. Sergeant Pike sometimes got away early, leaving him to lock the street door. However, he had no intention of climbing down. He waited for Manifold's answer, which came in a very different way from the light and chaffing tone he had employed up to that point.

He said, "What are you going to do about it?"

"I shall report it."

"Who to?"

"Mr. Goodnight."

"And what do you suppose he'll do about it?"

"Inform the Law Society and have your articles canceled."

"He won't."

"He'll have no option."

"He won't do it for two good reasons. The first is, that if he did so, he'd lose all the Collard work. I'd guarantee that."

Mr. Prosper looked at him with loathing.

"The second reason is, that if old Goodnight starts stirring up trouble he may find it bounces. Have you ever wondered why you don't look after his private tax? Why he handles it all himself?"

"What are you getting at?"

"How do you imagine he lives at the rate he does? Two houses, two cars, an expensive wife, shooting, fishing. He's been fiddling his tax for years. And the best of British luck to him."

By this time Mr. Prosper was profoundly shocked and almost speechless. If Manifold had cut short the interview at this point, the worst might not have occurred. Unfortunately, he changed gear, and said, with an unhappy assumption of bonhomie, "Come along, old chap, don't be an ass. Forget the whole thing."

Mr. Prosper took a deep breath, and said, "No."

"You're determined to make a fuss?" Manifold's mouth hardened. "You'd risk your job, and the jobs of everyone else here, for a few pounds that no one cares about, least of all the man who's paying it?"

"I won't be blackmailed into being accessory to a fraud."

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"I imagine," said Manifold with calculated brutality, "that other people here will be able to find themselves jobs. The typists and Sergeant Pike, and so on. But one thing I'm sure about, and that is that you won't."

"Insolence won't help you."

"You're not only stupid, you're old-fashioned. You're out of date. People like you aren't needed any more."

Anger was having its way with Mr. Prosper now—a red-hot, scalding anger that drove out fear.

"That job you're doing, counting on your fingers, it can be done by any school dropout with a pocket calculator. You're not just out of date. You're obsolete."

Mr. Prosper was on his feet now. His groping fingers touched the heavy round ruler on his desk and closed on it. He took two steps toward the astonished Manifold and swung a blow, downward, at his head.

Manifold had no difficulty at all in avoiding it. His reactions were twice as fast as Mr. Prosper's. He jumped back nimbly. The blow fell on thin air. Mr. Prosper overbalanced and collapsed, hitting his head on the corner of the desk as he went down. As he did so, the ruler shot out of his hand and hit Manifold on the shin.

Manifold laughed, picked up the ruler, and said, "Watch it, old boy. You'll be hurting someone."

He was struck by the way Mr. Prosper was lying and went down on to one knee beside him. He said, "Come along, get up off the floor."

The arm he was holding felt curiously limp.

A sound made him jerk his head round. Sergeant Pike was standing in the doorway. He said, "You'd better get hold of a doctor, Sergeant. Mr. Prosper's had a fall."

Sergeant Pike came over, pushed Manifold roughly out of the way, and knelt beside Mr. Prosper. After a long moment he got up, walked across the room, and locked the door, pocketing the key. Then he picked up the telephone and started to dial.

Manifold said, "What are you doing."

"I'm calling the police," said Sergeant Pike.

Cosmo Franks deployed the case for the Crown with the dispassionate care which is expected of Senior Treasury Counsel.

In answer to his questions, Mr. Dallow told the Court that the deceased had been on the point of exposing a systematic series of

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frauds by the accused. Sergeant Pike spoke of hearing a crash, coming into the room, and finding the accused bending over the body. He had been holding a heavy ruler in his hand and had put it down as the Sergeant came through the door. An officer from the Forensic Science Laboratory said that the fingerprints of the accused were on the ruler. The only surprise was the medical evidence.

Dr. Summerson, the Home Office Pathologist who had carried out the autopsy, gave it as his opinion that although a blow from such a weapon might have been a contributory cause of death, it would not have killed a man of normal health. Mr. Prosper, it appeared, was suffering from an advanced cardiac degeneration, a condition popularly known as fatty degeneration of the heart, probably the result of his life-long sedentary occupation.

"If it hadn't been for Summerson," said Junior Counsel, as he and Franks walked back from Court, "he'd have been booked for murder, that's for sure."

"It was illogical, whichever way you look at it," said Franks. "If he meant to kill him, the fact that he didn't hit him hard enough to kill a healthy man, and only happened to kill him because he was unhealthy, shouldn't have reduced the charge from murder to manslaughter."

"He was lucky," said Junior Counsel.

"It's not the sort of luck I'd care for myself," said Franks. "A hardened criminal might laugh off a five-year sentence. Not Manifold. It'll crucify him."

They walked on for some distance in silence. Franks said, "And he's not the only person in trouble."

This was true. When Jim Collard removed his work to another firm, Mr. Goodnight decided that it was time he retired. He had overlooked the fact that this step invited an automatic inspection of his affairs by the Revenue. He was now faced with criminal charges of tax evasion, the certainty of a crippling fine, and the possibility of imprisonment.

"When you think it through," said Junior Counsel, "really the only person who came well out of it was old Prosper. A quick death instead of months of hospital and misery."

"I suppose that's right," said Franks absently. He was already thinking about his next case.

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a *NEW* Simon Ark story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

On the terror trail once again with Simon Ark, the 2,000-year-old pursuer of evil . . . This time the trail of scarlet leads to a rambling old Victorian house in the north of London, a ghostly house with little porches and gables and birdcages everywhere—a hundred chirping, chattering birds . . . but at night not all the cages were covered . . .

THE HOUSE OF A HUNDRED BIRDS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

My wife Shelly had just learned I was going off again on a trip with Simon Ark, and we were having our usual quarrel. "Where is it this time?" she asked. "India? North Africa?"

"London, actually. We've been there before a couple of times."

"I remember. The first time was right after our marriage."

"Look, Shelly," I pleaded, "why not come along with us? You could shop and see the sights while I'm involved with Simon."

She shook her graying blonde head and I knew it was hopeless. "I can't get away this week. The committee dinner is on Thursday and mother's coming for a visit on the weekend."

"I'll bring you a gift from London," I said.

"The last time it was a bottle of perfume from the airport gift shop."

"I'll do better this time," I promised.

Her face relaxed into a tired smile. "I suppose it could be worse. You could be running off with another woman instead of Simon."

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"That would never happen," I assured her. "Not unless she looked just like you."

That evening Simon and I were on the plane to London.

The trip began badly for me. At Heathrow Airport a mousy little man bumped into me and stole my wallet. Luckily my traveler's checks and credit cards were in another pocket, but I still resented the loss. In the cab to London I grumbled all the way. "If you're such a great detective, Simon, why can't you catch the guy who stole my wallet?"

"My friend, a pickpocket is hardly the kind of challenge I seek."

He seemed about to drift into his philosophical ramblings about pursuing Satan for nearly two thousand years, and I was in no mood for it just then. I changed the subject. "Would you mind telling me just what it is that brought us to London? On the plane all you would say was that it involved Chauncey Rideout."

Rideout was a friend of Simon's whom I'd met once or twice in New York. He ran a large London travel agency, and was a garrulous man who seemed to fascinate Simon with his endless stories of far-away places.

"We're seeing Chauncey this afternoon. Perhaps it's better if he tells us himself. He did mention some intriguing aspects on the transatlantic phone, though. A murder, for one thing, and a house of a hundred birds."

"A house of—"

But Simon motioned toward the taxi driver's back and would say no more. I settled down and contented myself with the passing scene. Rideout had arranged for our airline tickets and hotel through his travel agency, and he'd booked us into a luxurious Park Lane place we could ill afford. Happily he was paying the expenses.

Chauncey Rideout was never overlooked when he entered a room. His large stomach, always covered by a bright red vest, announced his presence even before his booming voice. Seeing him later that day in his fancy London office I found him more subdued than I remembered, but still wearing the red vest.

"There were two sisters," he began after the usual preliminaries about our trip. "Anna and Gertrude Stigner. Retired civil servants, both in their sixties, never married. Lived in a big old family house in the north of London. I got to know them through the travel agency. Booked them on a two-week tour every spring, regular as clockwork.

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They liked the Mediterranean—the Greek islands and such—and I sort of took them under my wing."

"You speak of them in the past tense," I observed.

Chauncey Rideout nodded. "Gertrude was killed four days ago—last Friday night. Stabbed to death by an intruder in her own kitchen. About six months back they asked my advice about taking in a boarder. I suggested they advertise for one, and next thing I knew they'd rented to a chap named Irving. Now Anna fears he might be involved in the murder. She's scared stiff and I can't console her. I couldn't begin to tell her if this mysterious boarder might have killed her sister."

Simon Ark smiled slightly. "So you telephoned me across the ocean."

"You were the only one I knew who might be able to help," Chauncey said. "And you didn't seem very interested until I mentioned the birds."

"Yes, tell us about the birds," I urged. They seemed to be the key to Simon's interest in the affair, and I wanted to learn more.

"There's not much to tell, really. The sisters kept a great many caged birds in the big house. Canaries, doves, songbirds of various sorts. In every room. Anna told me once there were a hundred all together."

"A hundred birds!" I glanced over at Simon. "Is there any significance in one hundred caged birds?"

"Not in the number. But their presence suggests—"

We were interrupted by Rideout's secretary who entered the office with the afternoon's correspondence requiring his signature. She was a comely brunette named Thelma Bok and she flashed me a broad smile as we were introduced. "We were just talking about the birds out at the Stigner house," Rideout told her.

Thelma nodded. "I went there once last year to deliver their plane tickets for a tour. You wouldn't believe that many birds!"

"Are they quite noisy?" Simon asked.

"Noisy enough! Though she did cover their cages when they got too bad."

"She? Gertrude or Anna?"

"Gertrude—the one who died." She lowered her voice on the final word, as if in respect. "The birds were hers, really, though I think Anna cared for them too."

"I see." Simon turned back to Chauncey as his secretary left with

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the signed letters. "Would it be possible for us to meet Anna Stigner?"

"Certainly. Today was the funeral, so maybe tomorrow morning might be best. I'm sure she'll tell you whatever she knows."

"This boarder—have you ever met him?"

"I caught a glimpse of him the other day when I went out there. Young chap, with a beard and long hair. Don't know why they rented the space to that type in the first place. I suppose they needed the money, but they have some valuable pieces of furniture downstairs."

"One other question," Simon said as he stood up. "Did the hundred birds come before or after this boarder?"

"Oh, before. They've had the birds as long as I've known them, and Irving has only been there about six months. Since around the time they both retired. Douglas Irving—that's his name. He's a baker, which is supposed to explain why he's out all night and home during the day."

"I'll look forward to meeting him," Simon said. "In the morning."

A misty drizzle was falling the next day as we drove out to a residential section in the north of London. It was an area of big old houses, many of them now cut up into apartments for young working people. But even in such surroundings the Stigner house stood out. It was a rambling three-story monster, with little porches and gables everywhere. I suppose it was the perfect place to house a hundred birds.

Chauncey Rideout led the way up the steps to the porch, where dusty rockers creaked in the breeze just beyond the reach of the rain. He let the heavy knocker fall three times and presently the door was opened by a pale woman in black. She had once been beautiful, I thought, though age had played its usual unkind tricks. "This is Anna Stigner," Chauncey said, introducing us.

"Please come in." Her voice was soft and cultured.

She led us through a dim hallway into a pleasant sitting room at the front of the house, and I saw at once what all the bird fuss was about. There were cages everywhere—hanging from the ceiling in the outer hall, on standards in the sitting room, even resting on a table in an adjoining room. Some cages held a single bird, but many had pairs of doves or lovebirds. Their chirping, soft but constant, seemed to fill the house.

"I see you are a lover of birds," Simon remarked to the woman as

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he seated himself by the fireplace. I took a chair on the other side, grateful for the warmth after the chill drizzle outdoors.

"They were really Gertrude's," Anna Stigner explained, "but I may keep most of them. I couldn't imagine living here without them."

Chauncey shifted uneasily in his chair. "Tell them about Gertrude's death, Anna, and about your boarder."

Her thin hands moved on her lap as she spoke. "I hope you can help me, Mr. Ark. I just don't know what to do now. Gertrude was older and she always made the decisions for both of us. It was her thought that we should get a boarder for the downstairs after we both retired and our income dropped off. Douglas Irving seemed a nice enough chap at first."

"At first?" Simon questioned.

"Well, he simply appeared at our door one morning about the room, before we'd even had a chance to run an advertisement. He's a baker and works from two a.m. till ten in the morning. He baked cakes and pies for us, and even built a special table in the kitchen for mixing his dough. But he began having strange visitors a few months back. They'd drive up at night in fancy cars. Always men—he never had women visitors. My sister was bothered by it."

Simon Ark nodded. "Tell me about last Friday."

"It was late in the evening, a little before midnight. I hadn't been feeling well and I'd gone to bed early. I was awakened by a sound. It might have been Gertrude screaming for help. I called to her and there was no response." She hung her head, as if in silent prayer. "I put on my robe and slippers and went downstairs—and found her stabbed to death on the kitchen floor. Stabbed with one of our own knives."

"Was there any sign of forced entry?"

"No. I called the police at once, of course, but they could find no signs either. Gertrude and I each had keys, and of course Mr. Irving has one too. The police believe the intruder entered with a duplicate key."

"Did Douglas Irving have an alibi for the time of the murder?"

"He claims he'd stopped at a pub before work. The bartender remembers seeing him just before they closed, which was eleven o'clock. Of course the killing wasn't till a bit later than that, but the police don't seem to consider him a serious suspect."

"You do, though."

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She looked away. "He just acts strange. If Gertrude surprised him doing something bad he might have killed her."

"Had she ever surprised him at anything in the past?"

"Once she told me she came downstairs around midnight and he was in the kitchen with some men. They had flour spread out on the table and Douglas said they were making dough for bread."

Simon Ark asked, "Could we see this kitchen where your sister was stabbed?"

She led us through a dim back hall and a large pantry, with caged songbirds hanging overhead. Pausing at one of the cages she covered it with a fancy satin drape. "Time you were sleeping now!" she told the birds. But I noticed she did not cover all the cages.

The kitchen itself was large and roomy, with a big double-door refrigerator and modern sink and stove. But Simon's attention was drawn to a large square table with closed sides, closed from table top to floor, standing against one wall. It seemed almost like an altar to some ancient kitchen god. Simon ran his hand over the smooth knotted wood surface and commented, "Very good workmanship. Is this the table Irving built for his baking?"

"Yes. He said we could have it if he ever moved out."

"I think Douglas Irving is a man worth meeting."

"He should be home from work very soon."

"While we wait, Miss Stigner, suppose you tell me the real reason for all these birds."

She shot a glance at Chauncey Rideout, as if suspecting he had told us some secret. "I don't know what you mean. My sister liked—"

"You covered only some of the cages," Simon Ark said. "I'll venture a guess you have so many birds so that some may be left uncovered in each room day and night. It is believed in certain parts of the world that caged birds keep ghosts and evil spirits away from a house that may be haunted."

"I don't—"

"Isn't that what you really fear, Miss Stigner? That your sister was killed by a ghost?"

Anna Stigner had steadied herself against the table, her face suddenly white as chalk. She might have been seeing one of those ghosts herself in that moment. Rideout went quickly to her side and turned to scowl at Simon. "I asked you to help the poor woman, not frighten her!"

"If I am to help I need to know the truth. I believe she wishes to

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blame her boarder for the crime to free herself from the terror of the unknown, from the possibility of evil spirits lurking in this house she loves so much."

"I do love it," Anna Stigner gasped.

"Of course you do, or you would have moved long ago rather than fill the place with birds to keep away the spirits." Simon's voice turned unusually gentle. "Now tell me why you think a ghost may have killed your sister."

"Could I have a glass of water, please?"

Rideout ran the cold water and brought her a glassful. She drank it down and then straightened to face us, hands gripping the edge of the table behind her. "I didn't tell the whole truth about Friday. Gertrude had always been afraid the house was haunted. Our mother had told us years back of seeing ghosts here. That was the reason for the birds, and it was the reason we took in a male boarder. We believed it would give us some sort of protection. We traveled frequently when we could, just to be away from here, but it is a lovely house and we couldn't bear to sell it. So we put up with the creaks and crashes in the night—"

"The wind," Chauncey Rideout insisted. "Nothing more."

"—and we brought in all the birds, because they seemed to offer some protection. Then we took in Douglas Irving, to have a man on the premises. For a time it was good, despite his odd hours and strange companions. But then came last Friday. I was ill, as I've said, and had retired early. But about half-past eleven Gertrude came and wakened me. She said she heard a noise downstairs, though we both knew Irving had not returned. His car was not in the driveway."

She paused and Simon had to urge her on. "What happened next?"

"Gertrude went downstairs while I waited in my bedroom. I heard her say something unintelligible and then she screamed. It was the most terrible sound I've ever heard in my life! I hurried downstairs and found her stabbed to death here on the kitchen floor."

"And the ghost?"

"Mr. Ark, I will swear that I heard not a sound after Gertrude screamed. There were no running footsteps, there was no slamming door. The killer never left, and yet there was no one here!"

"There are many explanations," Rideout insisted, trying to calm her. "A thief may have been in his stocking feet to avoid making noise. He could have slipped out unnoticed as you came downstairs."

"No," she insisted. "I'd have seen him."

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Then we heard the front door open and footsteps approaching. We all turned toward the doorway as a slim young man entered. He must have been in his mid-twenties, with hair just over his ears and a dark fringe of beard across his chin. He seemed surprised to find us all gathered in the kitchen. "What's this?" he asked Anna Stigner. "More police?"

"This is my boarder, Douglas Irving," Anna said, and introduced Simon and me. Apparently Rideout had met him at the funeral.

"If you're not police, who are you?" the young man asked.

Simon answered for us. "I am an investigator of unusual phenomena. It's possible the death of Miss Stigner's sister was not caused by a human agency."

"Not caused—? You gotta be kidding, mate! I don't believe in ghosts!"

His arrival had set the kitchen birds to chirping and Anna Stigner covered their cages. Chauncey Rideout cleared his throat. "It's not a matter of believing in ghosts, Mr. Irving. But there was a crime committed here and the police seem unable to get to the bottom of it. If my old friend Simon Ark can shed some light on the matter, I believe we should listen to him."

"Sure, sure," Doug Irving agreed. "So long as you don't try and pin this thing on me. I was down at the Cross and Anchor and I got witnesses to prove it."

"The Cross and Anchor closes at eleven o'clock," Rideout pointed out. "The police checked on it."

"The bartender let me stay later, in the back room. We were drinking till past midnight. I couldn't have been here killing anybody."

"We'll see about that," Chauncey Rideout turned to us. "I have to get back to the office now. Can I drop you anywhere?"

"Our hotel, I think," Simon decided. "Goodbye for now, Miss Stigner, Mr. Irving. We'll be talking to you again."

As we were leaving the house Simon saw the rubbish men removing the Stigners' week's trash. Something in one of the cans attracted him and he walked over to examine it. The trash collector looked annoyed as Simon pulled out a large folded sheet of thin clear plastic and held it up.

"What's that?" Rideout asked, turning up his coat collar. The morning's drizzle had stopped but there was still a chill in the air.

"A plastic sheet," Simon remarked, stating the obvious. "There

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seems to be a small hole near the center." He put his finger through it.

"About the size of a knife blade," I suggested. "But wouldn't the police have found it?"

Chauncey Rideout was excited. "You mean the killer stabbed her through this to keep the blood off his clothes?"

"Such things have happened," Simon agreed. He tucked the folded plastic under his arm as the trash man went away grumbling.

Simon would say no more about his find, and when Rideout dropped us at the hotel I asked what we were going to do next. "I want to get this analyzed at a private lab," Simon said, patting the sheet.

"For traces of blood?"

"For whatever is to be found."

"How did you happen to notice it in the trash?"

"It seemed an odd thing for Miss Stigner to have—and odder still to be discarding, since it's still as good as new."

"Except for the hole."

"Except for the hole," he agreed. "While I'm doing that, I wish you would go to this pub, the Cross and Anchor, and speak with the bartender. It's increasingly important that we verify Irving's alibi for the night of the killing."

"Then you don't believe in ghosts?"

"Not unless I see one."

The Cross and Anchor was a typical London pub, located on the corner of a well-traveled street a few blocks from the Stigner house. The bar area had a number of afternoon drinkers, and I had to edge between them to order a pint of bitter. When the barman served me I asked, "Know a fellow named Doug Irving? He's a baker."

The barman, a burly fellow with muscular arms, wiped some moisture from the bar. "Oh, sure—Doug's in here evenings, before he goes to work."

"Was he in here last Friday evening?" I took a sip of my beer.

The barman turned away. "I already talked about last Friday to the police. You more of them, or are you a reporter?"

"Neither one. I'm just looking for information." I slipped a pound note across the bar.

"What do you want to know?"

"Were you on duty last Friday night?"

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"Sure, I was on. I'm on most of the time. My brother and I own the place. I'm Ike Dalton."

"Glad to know you, Ike." I shook his hand. "You know Irving pretty well, then?"

"Sure, I know him. Known him for years."

"Where'd he used to live before he moved in with the Stigner sisters?"

"Oh, he had an apartment over on Buckley Terrace. But he said his girl friend told him about the Stigner place and he took it. Said it was cheaper rent and closer to the bakery where he works."

"What about Friday night? He said he was drinking with you after the place closed."

Ike Dalton eyed me suspiciously. "You're not checking my hours, are you? I don't want no trouble on that."

"No, I just want to know about Doug Irving."

"Yeah, we were drinking in back. I told the police that, off the record. Nothing wrong with it. The drinks were on the house. Just a sociable thing."

"Till midnight?"

"Somew'at past, I'd say."

"He kept drinking till it was nearly time to go to work?"

"Hell, he don't work on Fridays! The other baker comes in then."

"You sure of that?"

"Pretty sure. I know he wasn't working last Friday. He was going back to his place to meet some people."

I slipped him another pound. "You've been a great help. Do you know the names of any of these people he hung around with?"

"No, he usually comes in here alone. I don't know much about his friends, except what he tells me."

"Thanks, Mr. Dalton. You've been a big help."

"Come again. And call me Ike. Everybody does."

I finished my pint of bitter and started for the door. I hadn't even noticed the woman in the booth until she spoke. "Buy me a pint, honey?" she asked.

I glanced down at her, ready to walk on, and then stopped dead. It wasn't her voice, with its accent verging on Cockney, that stunned me. It was her face.

It was the face of Shelly, my wife.

For just an instant I thought it might really be Shelly, following me across the Atlantic to surprise me like this; but then I realized

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the face was not quite right. It was a younger Shelly for one thing, looking the way I remembered her from a decade earlier. And even then the nose was not exactly hers. But the resemblance was still remarkable.

I sat down in the booth opposite her. "You look exactly like my wife."

She gave a bit of a chuckle. "Now that's a new line, mister."

"No, no, it's absolutely true! I simply can't believe it."

"Maybe I'm her sister."

"No, she's back in America."

"Does that win me a pint?"

"I think so." I stepped back to the bar and ordered two pints. Ike Dalton grinned a bit but said nothing. He'd seen it all before.

When I returned to the booth the woman introduced herself. "Mine's Milly Yeats. What's yours?"

I told her my name, still half stunned by the resemblance to Shelly. "Do you come here often?" I asked.

"This is my first time. I'm in West Kensington. Don't get up this way very often."

"What brought you here today?"

She smiled coolly. "Maybe I was following you."

"Oh, come now!" But I felt an uneasiness at the thought. I remembered the birds at Anna Stigner's house and wondered if ghosts ever walked by daylight, in English pubs.

"Why did you come to London?" Milly Yeats asked.

"I'm here with a friend."

"Girl friend?"

"Hardly! I told you I was married."

"Handsome chap like you can still have a girl friend."

We talked on like that for some time, and I wanted to get away but I couldn't. We had more beers, and presently the pub closed for its three-hour afternoon break. I was having trouble standing by then, and someone helped me outside. I'd never felt that way on beer before.

Presently I remember I was in the back seat of someone's car, and Milly Yeats was leaning over me and asking, "Why did you come here? What are you after?"

I answered something, hardly able to concentrate on my words.

"Who is Simon Ark?" someone else asked me.

Presently I remembered nothing except the car starting. We drove

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for a long time and I heard more voices. I opened my eyes and saw it was dark.

"We'd better finish the job," a man said quietly.

Then Milly's voice seemed to swim at me out of the darkness. "No, you don't! I didn't agree to anything like that! Dump him out if you want, but you're not killing him!"

"He could tell the police—"

"He won't remember a thing! Dump him out!"

The car slowed and I closed my eyes, trying not to move. The rear door opened and rough hands grabbed me under the shoulders, yanking me out. I tensed as I hit the ground, still not certain which of them had won the argument. But after a moment the doors slammed and the car drive away.

I started to get up but then fell back onto the roadway. That was the last I knew for some time . . .

When I came to I was in a hospital and Simon Ark was standing by my bed with Chauncey Rideout. "Can you talk? What happened, my friend?"

I struggled to sit up in bed. "It was Shelly—"

"Shelly?"

"A woman who looked like Shelly. I think she drugged me. They were going to kill me but she wouldn't let them."

Simon took a deep breath. "Try to tell us everything that happened."

I did that, repeating what the bartender, Ike Dalton, had said. Then I went on to my meeting with Milly Yeats. When I'd finished, Rideout could only shake his head. "You're lucky to be alive."

"Indeed," Simon agreed. "Do you think this bartender, Dalton, put them on you because you were asking questions?"

"Maybe. But the girl—she looked so much like Shelly!"

"This is some sort of gang," Rideout said, "but what are they up to? And why did they kill Gertrude Stigner?"

"Do not jump to hasty conclusions," Simon Ark told him. "If this so-called gang had committed one murder, they'd hardly have stopped at a second." He turned to me. "The doctors say you can be released after the drug wears off. How are you feeling?"

"Better every minute. Let's get out of here."

I tried to stand but was still wobbly. Simon helped to steady me. "You say they were questioning you. I suspect this woman slipped

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a knockout drug into your beer and then they injected you with one of the truth drugs like amobarbital or thiopental."

"Why? What were they after?"

"Information. They're worried we might have discovered something."

Finally I was feeling steadier, and as I slipped into my clothes Rideout phoned his secretary at the office. "Thelma, I'm at Charing Cross Hospital. I'll be in shortly. Are there any messages?"

If his secretary was in the office it had to be morning. I realized for the first time that I'd been unconscious all night. I pulled open the drapes and squinted against the morning sun. "What time is it?" I asked Simon.

"Just after nine. The hospital found your room key and called the hotel. I contacted Chauncey and we came right over."

Rideout hung up the phone. "I'm glad I called Thelma. She says that Anna Stigner phoned first thing this morning, very agitated. She wants to see us as soon as possible."

Simon rested an arm on my shoulder. "Are you up to it? Can you manage it?"

"Of course!"

But on the drive to the Stigner house I was still bothered by what had happened to me. "Put it out of your mind for the present," Simon advised.

"She looked just like Shelly—the way Shelly looked ten years ago. Even her hair was the way Shelly wore it! How is that possible, Simon?" And when he said nothing I asked, "You do believe me, don't you?"

"All in good time, my friend."

We arrived at the house to find a distraught Anna waiting to greet us at the door. "What in heaven's name is it?" Rideout asked.

"My birds! Three of them are dead!"

The news didn't seem to surprise Simon Ark. "Kitchen birds?" he asked.

"Yes, they were some of the ones I kept in the kitchen."

"And I imagine you let them fly around the room occasionally while you clean their cages?"

"Yes, but—"

"I should have warned you," he said, almost to himself.

"Was it the ghost? Did the ghost kill them? There's something evil in the kitchen, isn't there?"

"Yes, but it is not a ghost."

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We followed her into the kitchen and she showed us the dead birds. But Simon was more interested in the rest of the room. It didn't seem to have changed from our visit the day before, although he obviously had spotted something. He got down on his knees very gingerly and inspected the floor near the table at close range.

"What is it, Simon?" I asked.

"Nothing that I didn't expect to find." He got to his feet and I put out a hand to help him. "Miss Stigner, I need to ask a favor. I want you to tell your boarder when he comes in from work this morning that the past week's events have upset you so much you're going away for a few days' rest. Tell him you're going up to Harrogate to relax at one of the resort hotels."

"How long will I really have to be away?"

"Only a few hours if we're lucky. Chauncey, could she stay at your house, just for this evening?"

"Certainly!"

"But not a word of this to anyone! We're very close to finding the killer now, and getting to the bottom of this entire business."

"I hope so," I said. "Where will we be going, Simon?"

He smiled. "We'll be staying right here. I don't want anyone who's watching the house to see us enter later in the day."

"You mean—"

"I mean we'll be here tonight to see what happens in Miss Stigner's absence."

We hid ourselves in an upstairs bedroom as soon as Douglas Irving made his appearance. It was a long afternoon and once Anna Stigner had departed, the big house seemed strangely desolate. The constantly chirping birds did nothing to dispel the feeling, at least for me.

"We're to remain here until evening?" I asked Simon quietly, munching on a sandwich Anna had left for us.

"Correct. Irving must be convinced he's perfectly safe and alone in the house."

"Then you believe him to be the killer?"

"I didn't say that. I believe him to be in charge of the strange happenings in the kitchen."

"What are they—ghosts, devil worship? That table he built could be an altar." I took another bite of the thin sandwich. "And what killed the birds?"

"Freedom, in a sense."

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"Stop talking in riddles, Simon! If I'm going to be stuck here all day you can at least give me a few facts."

"Very well," he agreed with a sigh. "What do you want to know?"

"That woman, Milly Yeats—the one who looks like Shelly. How was it possible that one of the gang—if there is a gang—could so resemble my wife?"

Simon leaned back in his chair. "Nothing supernatural about that. Many men carry a picture of their wives in their wallet."

"My wallet!" I started to reach for it and then remembered it was gone. "You mean the man who stole my wallet at the airport was—"

"Part of this so-called gang? Yes, I think so. You said her appearance and hair style were the way Shelly looked years ago. The way she looked in the photo you carried in your wallet—correct?"

"My God, Simon, I never thought of that!"

"They stole your wallet to find out who you were, what you were doing here. But the wallet contained no incriminating identification—only a picture of your wife. By chance they knew someone who resembled her, and with some makeup and a change in hair styling they made her look like the picture of Shelly. It was enough to grab your attention so this Milly could drug you and they could question you further. I suspect Milly will prove to be a prostitute or some sort of shady character."

"I think she saved my life, Simon. They wanted to kill me but she wouldn't let them."

There was a creaking on the stairs and Simon motioned me to silence. We waited, barely breathing, as we heard doors opening down the hall. "He's checking the rooms," Simon whispered. "Quickly, into the closet."

We huddled in the darkness, up against some musty coats, as our bedroom door opened and then closed again. After a time we heard steps going back downstairs. "He's not taking any chances," I whispered.

"We may not have much longer to wait."

About an hour later the doorbell rang and we heard low voices in the downstairs hall. Then there was silence again, for nearly another hour. It was almost evening when a car pulled up across the street and we saw three shadowy figures emerge. They came quickly toward the house and the doorbell sounded again.

"This is it," Simon said. "Come on—but very quietly!"

We left our hiding place and crept out to the top of the stairs. As the evening shadows lengthened in the house, the birds had quieted

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down. In the upper hall Simon covered their cages so our presence wouldn't stir them up again. The downstairs seemed almost dark now, though there was a glow of light from the hallway leading to the kitchen.

We moved slowly down the stairs, well aware of their tendency to creak. I tested each tread lightly and stepped over the worst of them, helping Simon to do likewise. Finally we were at the bottom, and made our way down the hall to the kitchen.

I'd expected some devilish rites, or a sinister meeting at the very least. But what we saw was prosaic in the extreme—four men in bakers' whites standing around the kitchen table. A sheet of clear plastic had been spread across the table, and several small mounds of flour emptied on it. I might have been standing in the back room of the corner bakery.

It was Irving who whirled around and saw us. For just an instant there was a trace of panic on his face. Then he relaxed and said, "Simon Ark, isn't it? And your friend. What are you doing here? I thought the house was empty."

"We came to watch," Simon explained simply. "And to solve a murder."

The other three men were older than Irving, and one of them was a mousy little fellow who looked familiar. "Simon," I said, suddenly remembering, "he looks like the fellow who bumped into me at the airport when my wallet was stolen!"

"I never—" the man began, but Simon cut him short.

"I'm sure it's the same person. They needed to know what we'd come for. They must have suspected we were drug-enforcement agents of some sort."

"Drugs?"

"Of course. Did you suppose merely because they are dressed like bakers that is flour on the table? It is pure cocaine, waiting to be cut and no doubt distributed through Irving's bakery."

That was when the mousy little man drew a pistol from beneath his white jacket. "We should have killed them earlier," he said. "This time I'll do it myself."

Simon Ark held up his hands, as if to deflect the bullets. "It would be unwise to shoot us until you hear what I have to say. It should be very important to you."

I was dumfounded by the turn of events. "How did you know it was cocaine, Simon?"

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"There were traces of it on that plastic sheet I had analyzed, and the death of the birds confirmed my belief it was being cut here in the kitchen. Out of their cages, the birds found bits of the drug on the floor, ate the bits, and died. You'll remember Anna told us her sister surprised these men once with flour on the table. Only it wasn't flour that time either."

"So she found them again Friday night and they killed her," I suggested.

The mousy man cursed and raised his gun. "We've had enough talk."

"If you kill us," Simon said, speaking quickly, "the police will be certain you killed Gertrude Stigner as well. Put down your gun and I'll tell you who really killed her."

The man hesitated and Irving said, "He's trying to trick us, Harry."

Simon pressed his advantage, like an elderly schoolmaster making his point to an unruly class. "Listen to me, Harry. You're being cheated. Mr. Irving here has very cleverly connived to steal some of your cocaine."

"Don't listen to him!" Irving shouted, in full panic now. "He's crazy! He's a cop!"

But one of the men with Harry ordered, "Let him talk."

Simon strode carefully past the pointed gun and pushed aside the pile of cocaine from the center of the big wooden table. "Let me tell you a story—about bakers in Fourteenth Century London. Not many people know this story, but I imagine it's well known to London bakers like Douglas Irving here. It seems there was a baker named John Brid who often invited neighbors and others to bake their bread in his oven. They would come with their flour and put it on his table. But in the top of this special table was a small hole which could be opened from below—perhaps about the size of one of these knots in the wood. John Brid had a servant hidden beneath the table, to open the hole and steal the flour, little by little. It was said he and other London bakers stole a large quantity of flour from their neighbors in this manner."

The man named Harry peered more closely at the table top. "You mean he's been stealing my pure cocaine through a hole in the table?"

"If you need any more evidence, here's a tear in the plastic sheet, just over this knot. When the hole was opened the sheet had to be cut from below to get at the cocaine."

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Harry swung the pistol on Doug Irving. "You dirty crook! I'll—"

"And," Simon hurried on, "that was what caused Gertrude Stigner's death. She didn't come upon you mixing your so-called dough. After all, that had happened before without her realizing the truth. No, this time she came downstairs to discover Irving's confederate crawling into position beneath the table. And for that she was killed."

The wooden panel hiding the end of the table suddenly swung open, and a black-clad figure tried to scamper to freedom. But Simon grabbed at it and I helped, catching a leg and holding firm. "Let me introduce Irving's accomplice, and the killer of Gertrude Stigner," Simon Ark said.

It was Chauncey Rideout's secretary, Thelma Bok.

Then a great many things happened at once. Irving dove for Harry's gun and wrestled him to the floor while Simon and I clung to our captive. The other two men decided to run, and they were at the front door when we heard the sound of police whistles. In a few moments it was all over. There were police and detectives everywhere, and in their midst was Chauncey Rideout looking aghast at his secretary. "Thelma, what in hell are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Chauncey," Simon informed him. "She killed Gertrude Stigner."

"I can't believe it! Did you know this all the time?"

"I had a strong suspicion," Simon admitted. "My friend's pocket was picked on our arrival at the London airport, by this man Harry who was seeking more information about us. He later had my friend drugged for the same purpose. But who knew we were arriving in London? Only you, Chauncey, because you made our reservations. Only you, and of course your secretary who always handles the actual arrangements.

"We heard from Anna Stigner that Doug Irving came looking for a room before she'd even had a chance to advertise for a boarder. Again, only you—and Thelma here—knew of the Stigner sisters' intentions.

"The bartender at the Cross and Anchor informed my friend that Irving's girl friend told Irving about the Stigner house. Who could the girl friend be, other than our Thelma here? There was confirmation in the fact that Anna told us Irving never had women visitors. Why should his girl friend stay away after suggesting Irving

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move here, unless it was because she was known to the Stigner sisters and didn't want to be connected with Irving?"

"That told you she was his girl, but what about the murder?" I asked.

"Remember the hole in that plastic sheet I found yesterday? That plus the look of the table Irving built suggested to me that he might be familiar with John Brid's old baker's trick. Of course the scheme called for an accomplice hidden under the table to steal the flour—or cocoaine in this case. Irving's girl seemed the likely person. She would enter the house with a duplicate key before Irving arrived with the rest of the gang to cut the cocaine. They probably worked the scheme several times before Gertrude caught Thelma sneaking into the kitchen.

"Thelma stabbed her with a kitchen knife and hid under the table when Anna came to investigate. That's why Anna didn't hear anyone leaving the house. Then Thelma no doubt sneaked out while Anna was on the phone to the police. You see? Thelma was Irving's likely girl friend, and supplied the information about our arrival. The girl friend was most likely Irving's accomplice in the cocaine stealing. And the accomplice was the most likely killer, because Irving had an alibi and the accomplice knew a natural place to hide after the killing when Anna heard no one. Therefore, Thelma Bok is the most likely killer."

"But you weren't sure until she came out from under that table."

Simon Ark smiled. "No, I wasn't sure," he admitted.

One of the Scotland Yard men came in from outside, leading Milly Yeats by the arm. "I found this one waiting in a car down the street," he announced.

Simon stared at the face that was so much like Shelly's. "Is she the one who drugged you?" he asked.

I looked into Milly's eyes. "She's the one," I said quietly. And then to the detectives, "Go easy on her. She wouldn't let them kill me."

Milly stood for a moment staring at me. "I swear I didn't know what was going on. Harry just hired me to do a job. I was waiting to get paid now." Her voice softened a bit. "You got some lucky wife, fella. I envy her. You know, you and I could have had some great times together."

The birds were still chattering as Simon and I left the house. Maybe they were keeping the ghosts away.

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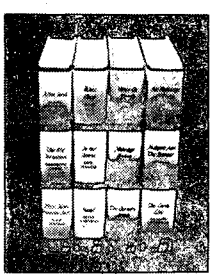

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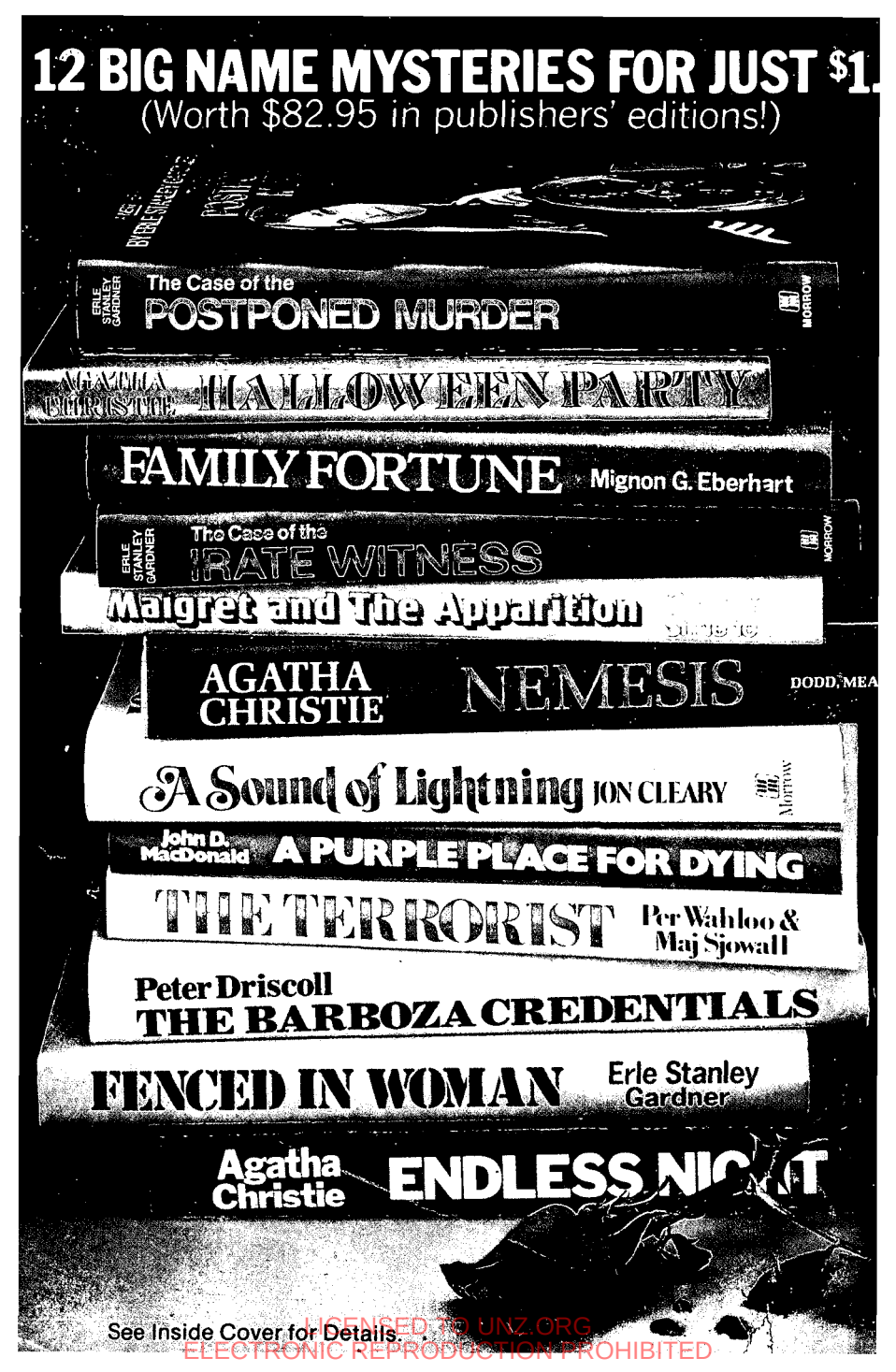

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